WORK OF DARKNESS

A Novel of youth in the jungles of New York

by JACK KARNEY

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A NOVEL BY **Jack Karney**

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
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To Yetta, for our twenty-first wedding anniversary; to Barbara, Eva Lou and Richard, who gave these anniversaries substance.

. . . it is high time to awake out of sleep:
for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.
The night is far spent, the day is at hand:
let us therefore cast off the works of darkness,
and let us put on the armour of light.

Romans 13:11–12

EXTRA

TWO YOUTHS SLAIN IN JUVENILE GANG WAR

Tonight guns blazed on Delancey Street just a block from the 7th Police Precinct on Manhattan's lower East Side. Two youths were riddled with bullets; a third apparently escaped. According to an eyewitness, as the three unidentified youths dashed out of the tenement building at 180 Delancey St., four or five men, guns blazing, ran out of the shadows under the Williamsburg Bridge superstructure. Two of the youths were shot down, one in the gutter, the other in an alley where he tried to hide. The police believe the third youth may have been shot before escaping. The police have alerted all hospitals and doctors to be on the lookout for him.

Inspector Cannon, in charge of Manhattan East detectives said: "We believe we know who these boys are, who shot them and why. We have sent for their families to confirm our identification. The three boys, the two victims and the one who got away, spent the last two days in the same apartment, evidently hiding from these killers. We have reason to believe at least one uses narcotics. The way we see it, the boys ran out of food—if they had any to start with—and had to make a break for it. Forty-eight hours is a long time to be hungry."

(*See later editions for further details.*)

PART ONE

Lenny

1.

The Inspector had failed in his calculations by barely two hours. Fifty hours ago three youths had raced up the stairs and into the house, frantically bolted the door and flicked on the lights, then stood staring at each other, completely stunned, faces gray as ashes. . . .

When Lenny Kramer, the smallest and youngest of the three youths, saw the fear in the eyes of his two friends, he did not feel ashamed of the terror swelling in his chest. He leaned against the door, listening.

Joe Kusack went to the window, looked out from behind the green shade. "We shouldn'ta run up here." He breathed raggedly through an open mouth. "There's Big Mac's boys outside. They'll carry us out of here feet first."

Juan Rivera smiled thinly. In a singsong voice he said, "Now it too late. We come to get money, we get bullet."

"Shut up!" Joe Kusack cried. "You talk like a streak of lightnin'. I don' know what the hell you Spiks jabber about."

Calmly, Juan Rivera said, "You want Juan explain, Polack?"

Joe Kusack shook his fist. "Call me Polack once more and I'll kill you, so help me."

Lenny shot them a troubled look. "Go ahead, fight your brains out. We haven't got enough trouble. Joe, the fire-escape window!"

Swearing violently, Joe Kusack whirled, raced into the bedroom. The window was closed. No one waited on the fire escape. Standing in the center of the room, legs astraddle, his body began to tremble.

"Come on, Big Mac!" he shouted at the window. "Come and get me."

Lenny, behind him, said, "Don't be so tough, Joe. They'll come soon enough." The banter in his tone could not hide the choke and the fear pulling at his throat. "They got guns, we got nothing but spitballs."

Joe covered his face with his hands. "God, give us a break. One lousy break."

Lenny was surprised at his sudden calmness. "Anyway, they won't bust in on us. That'd make too much noise and bring cops. They'll wait till we get tired and come out. They got time, plenty time."

Juan Rivera smoked his cigarette in short, violent puffs. "We no got time, no food, only a little white powder. . . ." He shrugged.

Joe Kusack snarled. "Goddam H. I should worry about that. But how long we gonna last without a hunk a bread?"

Juan shook his head sadly. "No bread, no nothing."

"Go on, blame it on me. I should know we'll have to hole up in here. I should know we're gonna need a grocery store."

Simmering with exasperation, Lenny said, "Fight your damn heads off. What about that fire-escape window? We gonna stay awake all night watching it?" For the first time in his life, he felt the power of authority. "How about the boards on the bed, Joe? We could nail 'em across the window."

Joe Kusack took a cigar out of his trouser pocket. He removed the cellophane wrapper, straightened out the cigar which had become bent in the close confines of his pocket.

"Yeah," he said. "I seen some nails in the stove when I first got this flat." Without lighting the cigar, he went into the kitchen, opened the gas range, stuck his hand inside and when it came out, he clutched dirt and dust and half a dozen rusty penny nails. He laughed. "Lucky we never cleaned this stove."

Lenny said, "We got an empty Pepsi-Cola bottle we could use for a hammer. Get the board, Joe."

"Get it yourself."

"What's got into you, Joe?"

"You don't like it, take a mouthful of horse manure and spit it in my face."

"Those cracks used to be funny. No more."

Lenny went into the bedroom. With Juan's help he removed the mattress, standing it against the wall, lifted the side boards on the bed.

Fuming, Joe Kusack came into the room. "Where'm I supposed to sleep?"

"On the mattress," Lenny said. "You slept on the bare floor lotsa times, so what you crying about? You fall off the mattress, you don't drop far."

. . .

Lenny lay on the couch in the living room, one arm thrown over his eyes, protection against the glare of the overhead electric light. He could hear Joe Kusack moving restlessly about the room, the crisp rattle of the shade, the angry grunt that came up from the Polish boy's insides, the string of swear words, Joe's heavy steps going into the bedroom. Lenny and Joe had shared the bedroom for two years, but tonight Lenny had decided he wanted to sleep alone on the couch.

Better than listening to Polack's bellyaching, keeping him awake all night.

Juan Rivera had been given a blanket which he'd stretched under the right window in the corner of the room. They'd opened the window, six inches from the top, two inches from the bottom.

Joe Kusack had been against opening any of the windows. "They're liable to throw bombs in or somethin'."

Without telling Joe how stupid the idea was, Lenny had settled it with, "In this summer heat, a guy could die from suffocation."

Lenny could hear Juan's breathing, like the language he spoke, soft and musical.

It was past midnight. Delancey Street was noisy, the voices of the people in the streets, children running, yelling, kicking a can, the squeal of brakes as a dog's yelp was cut abruptly short, and above it all the steady drone of motors from the cars going over the Williamsburg Bridge less than fifty feet from the living-room window. Lenny could hear them, see them, the people, the children, the dog, the cars . . . the silent men waiting in the underpass of the bridge, big guns in their shoulder holsters.

"Joe," he said, "put out the lights. Let's get some sleep."

"No," Joe cried from the bedroom. "You gotta have a little light. I don't like the dark."

"All of a sudden you don't like the dark."

"A guy could kill you quick in the dark, shank you in the back before you could see who done it."

Juan stirred restlessly, a ghost of a whisper stirring his lips. In turning his shoe he hit the baseboard and the noise sounded loud.

Lenny closed his eyes. What night was this? Friday night, Saturday Eve. Shabbas Eve. That's the way it was at home, Papa's home. Once he'd lived there too. . . . Papa shouldn't have chased him out of the house. Then, maybe . . . He laughed to himself. At home or catting out, he still would have been in the same mess. How had it happened? So easy, like sliding down a greased sliding pond in Seward Park.

Shabbas Eve. The house smelling of food and drink. All day Mama cooked and baked and long before sundown the delicious smells hung over the house and filled the hallways. Floors away you could almost taste the *gefüllte* fish and the hot *chaleh*. Only Mama could bake *chaleh* like that. Most of the other women bought their *chalehs* in the stores but Mama liked to bake her own, two feet long, about a foot high, braided on top, golden brown, crisp and melting in the mouth. And the roast chicken. What was Shabbas without chicken and steaming golden soup, *kreplach* floating on the top, three-cornered battleships filled with spicy chopped meat. Then the *kugel*, squares of baked potato pudding. . . .

And all the time Papa pouring that *slivovitz* into his gullet, watching you, listening, waiting for you to forget to say the different blessings for the different foods.

Papa'd cry, "Goy, you don't know what's a *matzo?*"

Abruptly Lenny sat up on the couch. From where he was standing at the window, Joe Kusack said, "Stop jumpin' like that."

Lenny rubbed his face with both hands. "My nightmares come easy these days. Just close my eyes and my old man is there." A cold tightness swelled up in his chest. "Why the hell can't he leave me alone?"

Juan came stumbling to his feet. "Wha' happened, Doc? Wha' . . . ?"

Joe said, "He's dreamin'."

With the back of his hand, Juan wiped sweat from his forehead. "So why you holler, Doc? You wake Juan."

"Sorry." In a harsh tone of revolt and rage, he cried, "That goddam bastard can't stop creeping up on me. Throws me out of the house . . . like a dog. . . . God, he used to beat the hell out of me." He leaned back on the couch, closed his eyes. "I can still feel his belt buckle ripping chunks out of my hide. If my old lady hadn't stopped him, he would've killed me. Bang, smash, bang . . . his face getting madder all the time, screwing up like a crazy man, blood in his eyes. . . ."

Juan said, "Juan hungry."

Joe laughed. "You want me to run down to Gluckstern's and get you a steak and fries?"

Juan cried, "What kind house this is, no eats?"

Lenny said, "We'll fast like on Yom Kippur. All day, twenty-four hours, no food, no drink, nothing. Then comes the night and you come home from *shul* and you eat like a horse. I used to get sick trying to make up for what I'd missed all day. Mama, she used to drink some

chicory coffee and eat a piece of black bread and butter. She was smart. Me, my old man, my sister Yetta, we ate and ate. My old man drank *slivovitz.* Burns a hole in your belly. . . . God, he used to beat me."

"All right, all right!" Joe cried. "So he beat you. So he killed you. Shut y' damn hole."

Lenny's fists clenched on his thighs. "Like a dog he beat me . . . threw me out of the house like I was somebody's bastard kid . . . Mama cryin' all the time."

A sob escaped his lips. He quickly covered his face with his arms. The beatings hadn't been so bad. With all his heart and soul he wished he were back in Papa's house taking a beating. Anything was better than this, cooped up in a hole, hungry, a curious ache in his heart he couldn't explain, waiting for Big Mac's gang to pump bullets into him. . . .

2.

Papa was beating him again.

This Yom Kippur day Lenny had been in *shul* at Papa's side, praying with the congregation. Occasionally he caught Papa looking at him, a proud kind of look that said: Hear my fifteen-year-old son read Hebrew like the rabbi himself. Some day my son will lead this congregation. Some day, God willing, he may even be a rabbi.

Papa never told you if he liked what you did, never by word. If something displeased him, he hollered plenty. If you pleased him, he just wore that proud look in his eyes . . . like now in *shul,* standing tall and proud, sharp gray

eyes sweeping over the other members of the small congregation. This is Leonard Kramer, my son, see how he *dovens* this Yom Kippur day.

Around noon when it was time for the *Yiskor* prayers for those who had lost a parent, Lenny went outside. Papa had waved a bony finger at him, gray eyes wide over the metal-rimmed glasses.

"Outside means outside not a mile away. Understand me?"

Lenny nodded, went out on Norfolk Street with the other people fortunate enough to have their parents living. It was a dark day. Black clouds, heavy with the promise of rain, moved slowly across the sky.

A few minutes later Frankie Davis and Shlemie Cohen came by. Walking in the gutter, they smoked cigarettes, and Shlemie blew cigarette smoke in the direction of the synagogue and the worshipers as if to show his contempt for any religious ruling that forbade smoking on a holy day.

"Hi, Doc," Frankie said. "What for you hanging around here?"

"I gotta."

"You don't gotta," Shlemie said. "Walk us down a couple blocks."

Lenny went for a short walk and before he knew it he heard the church bells down at City Hall ring four times. Ignoring the snide remarks of his two friends, he rushed back to the *shul*, desperately inched his way into his seat while Papa was praying. He picked up his *talis*, draped the prayer shawl around his shoulders.

Without looking up from his book, Papa said, "Go home."

Lenny looked at him with a quiet, level glance. "I forgot the time."

Papa's icy gray eyes drilled through him. "The *talis* put down, go home."

Lenny lifted his shoulders, his eyes disturbed. "Papa . . ."

In a burst of temper Papa yanked the prayer shawl from around his shoulders, pushed him toward the door. Still praying, heads turned, accusations in every eye.

Anguish swelled and mushroomed inside him. "Papa, I went for a walk."

The cords of Papa's neck stood out like thick wire. "Home, *bandit*, with the rest of the *goyim*."

There was nothing to do but obey.

That night Papa beat him, and as the belt swished through the air, Papa cried in a singsong voice, as if still chanting the prayers, "The *talis* you dirtied, dirtied, dirtied. Where you went with Frankie? To me you don't lie. People saw you. Frankie, the *goy*, and Shlemie, the bum. How many times I didn't tell you from bums stay away. On Yom Kippur you don't eat, eat, eat."

Huddled in the corner of his room, Lenny sobbed, "I didn't, I swear I didn't eat."

There was rage in every line of Papa's bony face. "You . . . Frankie . . . the other bum . . . eating fruit."

Lenny didn't know which was the greater sin, stealing the fruit or eating it on the Holy Day. They'd gone past an Italian fruit cart on Rivington Street. Frankie and Shlemie had helped themselves to some apples and pears. The Italian's beady eyes had watched while he cursed under his breath, not daring to protest lest the boys dump the whole cartload into the dirty gutter.

Lenny looked at Papa with fear and resentment. "Papa, I swear I didn't eat fruit—please, Papa."

"How many dollars, dollars, dollars, I spend for *chedar?* The rabbi learned you nothing? Yom Kippur!"

Papa took a firmer grip on the belt, swung again and again in a new burst of energy. Lenny crawled to his feet, threw both arms around Papa's knees.

"Please, Papa—you're killing me."

"From Frankie stay away. Shlemie don't go near. Understand me? No Frankie, no Shlemie."

Mama came in crying. "Enough, Sam, enough. You kill him, you settle everything?"

She got between them, hands raised. Mama weighed exactly ninety pounds, and Lenny knew that Papa, with one sweep of his bony but powerful arm, could cast her to one side; but somehow, as if Mama was a cooling agent, Papa's anger drained out of him.

"Next time Mama, she will not be here, then I give it to you good. Remember, Leonard . . . next time."

That was the way it always was, the beating, the saving, the threat to remember for the future.

After a while, tears still drying on his face, Lenny went out of the house, up to the roof. Now in the evening the September heat hung in the still night air. The threatened rain had not come. It was close, uncomfortable. Across the row of adjoining tenements, he could see the shirt-sleeved men, the women in backless house dresses, sitting on bridge chairs. A boy of ten and a girl of six were walking on the steel girders that had once supported a water tank. They moved carefully, as if walking on wire, balancing themselves with outstretched arms.

The big clock on the Forward Building read 9:20.

Somebody said from behind him, "You the Caruso making with the song?"

Lenny turned. Rose Tocci and a new boy friend had come silently onto the roof. The Tocci family were next-door neighbors to the Kramers. Rose was eighteen, black shiny hair except for a dyed blonde lock in front. Big-chested, she had a thin face, heavily rouged. In the semi-darkness, the man looked familiar.

The man spoke. "Caruso, you don't sing good but you're sure loud."

Angrily, "I ain't Caruso."

Rose said softly, "Lay off him, Yuss, Doc's my friend."

Every time Lenny saw Rose, he remembered how he'd once got a beating because of her. It hadn't been her fault, not really. He didn't have to taste the pizza pie she'd baked. And having eaten a wedge, he didn't have to tell Papa how delicious it was. Forgetting that pizza pie with sliced sausage was not kosher, he'd opened his big mouth, and Papa had beat him for ten minutes.

Yuss said, "I just wanted to find out the name of the song so I could get Irving Berlin to write it up and Eddie Fisher to record it. We'd all make money."

Lenny decided right then and there he didn't like Rose's new boy friend. Yuss was tall, gaunt, his shoulders so round he seemed to be stooping. His fingers clutching a cigarette were crooked. A hooked nose looked enormous in the sallow face, and when he talked his thin lips barely moved.

Lenny turned away. "Shut y' hole."

"I'll break your little ass. You!"

Compelled by the roughness in the man's voice, Lenny turned. "Next time don't start up with me."

Rose laughed. "That's telling him, Doc."

The man's smile was mirthless. "He's got guts. Look out I don't cut him open to find out how much."

Rose said, "Yuss Wacks versus Lenny Kramer. Aw, he's only a kid."

Lenny blinked. Yussel Wacks! He should have recognized the Grand Street mobster. Yussel Wacks was chief of the Pineapple gang, a name taken from a gang who during prohibition days had been known for their ability to heave exploding pineapples through plate-glass windows. Everybody knew Yussel, the best-dressed man in the well-dressed mob. None of this kid stuff with the pegged pants and ducktail haircomb and jackets that came down to the knees. Yuss wore a dark suit, red-and-white-striped tie, white-on-white shirt, shoes always polished. Even now in the heat, Yuss looked nice and neat.

Rose took a cigarette out of the pack Yuss held out to her, lit it herself with his metal lighter. "We going to a movie or what?"

Yuss flipped his butt over the black parapet. "I don't feel like it. Anyway, I wanna shoot the breeze with the kid."

Her eyes narrowed. "Leave Doc alone."

There was cool amusement in Yuss's voice. "You like him so much, maybe you give out for him too."

"Yuss!" She caught her lips in her teeth, chewed angrily.

Yuss touched her bare arm. His words had a wheedling sound. "Stop making like Joan Crawford. I was kiddin'. The kid knows I was kiddin'. Right, kid?"

Lenny gave him a brief nervous smile. "Sure, Yuss, what else?"

"See?" He gave her a pitying glance. "You broads are all alike. Turn y' upside down and nobody'd tell the difference. Say, Doc, where you kids hang out?"

"Heshie's candy store on Delancey."

"A lousy candy store. Funny, I used to hang out in a candy store. Must be something to it, kids always hanging out in a candy store where they can grab themselves a hunk of halvah or something. Some day you'll get y'selves clubrooms."

Lenny shrugged. "It takes money, and most of the guys go to school."

There was a slow curl to Yuss's lips. "A guy can make a buck, school or no school. I seen you kids in a couple rumbles; pop-bottle fights with the Rivington Street boys. Two kids wind up in the hospital. That Joe Kusack and Frankie-what's-his-name."

"Davis." Lenny's chest came up proudly. "The Panthers ain't no kids. We're fifteen. Joe, he's sixteen, going on seventeen."

Yuss looked annoyed. "I was talking, kid. So hole up till I finish, yeh? Last Election Day you kids had a war with the Pitt Street Counts. One kid in Gouverneur with a split head."

Lenny grinned. "Joe Kusack, he's sure one lucky guy. Me, I got a shiner."

Yuss snorted. "Over lousy election wood? You nuts? That all you got in your brain, election-day fires?"

Lenny grinned sheepishly. "Joe Kusack, he gets a kick out of watching fires."

"Psycho."

"He's a nice guy."

"Okay, okay. He's a nice guy, the best in the world.

Satisfied? You gonna lemme finish? You and your dumb friends. Why get banged up in a lot of club fights and get nothing for it?"

Lenny looked away but like a magnet the man's intense gaze drew his head around. "We have fun," he said lamely. "What the hell else is there for kids to do around here at night? You can't play no basketball on account of the gym is closed. You play in the schoolyard, you get chased."

"Suckers get their heads banged up for nothing."

Lenny glanced at Rose. She seemed worried. He said, "I guess so."

"So instead of wasting time and muscle pushing guys around, why not get paid for it?"

Suspicion tugged at his mind. "I don't like pushing anybody around."

Yuss snickered. "You been doing it, every week, on other kids. What you get for it? Nothing, not a goddam red cent. I can get you jobs busting somebody around. . . ."

Quickly Lenny said, "Not me."

"Five bucks, maybe ten for each guy."

"I don't like it. I better go down."

"I ain't finished."

"I gotta have supper. Honest, Yuss."

"Five bucks for having fun."

"It's not fun, not like that."

"What you want, a band of music?"

Lenny backed away. "My old lady, she gets worried kind of easy."

Rose said, "Let him go, Yuss. You been drinking too much red wine. Forget it, Doc. Yuss was only clowning."

There was a slow hardening to Yuss's lips. "You shut

up. I thought you had brains, Doc. A doc's supposed to have what it takes."

"Brains enough not to go killing people."

"Who said anything about killing anybody? You a psycho too?"

A sense of righteousness raised Lenny's voice. "Those guys in Brooklyn, they started off like that, just pushing people around. I read about it in a book, and my old man never stops telling me about it. Those kids, banging guys around for a couple bucks. Then cutting a guy to pieces. Then knocking off guys, doing shank jobs with an ice pick, burning up the bodies. . . ."

Yuss cried, "What the hell you talking about? Okay, go on and run to your old lady's titty. Next week you'll mix with some dopey kids from some dopey block. You'll bang them and they'll bang you. And you'll all get balls for it, and maybe wind up in a hospital. But you'll sure have fun. Right? But because I pick out the guy who gets slapped around, we got a Fed case."

Sullenly Lenny said, "Some guy I never saw."

"I'll introduce you, okay, then you can split his skull."

"No." Lenny whirled, ran a few steps to the door. "I don't do that kind of business. You ain't gonna make me."

Lenny ran down the stairs, almost stepping on a man sitting on a step.

"Take it easy, Buster," the man said.

Lenny stared. This was Big Mac, Yuss's bodyguard, a giant bearded man with large brown eyes and so wide in the shoulders, it frightened him. He turned quickly, took the stairs two at a time.

Papa looked up from where he was reading the *Forward*. Blinking over his bifocals, he said, "Running, always

running like a crazy man. You can't walk like a *mench?*"

Mama came away from the sink, drying a glass with the soiled dish towel. "Where you was, Lenny?" Soft brown eyes squinted. "It's not time to eat something?"

He turned his back to her, stalked abruptly to the window. "I'm not hungry."

Lenny heard her house shoes scraping on the linoleum as she came to him. "It's not time?" she said again. "Your face, it is so red." Her soft, moist hand came around to touch his forehead. "Fever maybe you got?"

Lenny laughed. "I got no fever, Mama." He knew he was shaking. Yuss Wacks had done that to him, talking crazy. Coming down the stairs from the roof, a cold panic had grown tight in his throat. He'd become scared . . . and he couldn't understand why.

Mama persisted. "You got to eat. All day you fast."

Papa, filling his glass with tea from the kettle, grunted something unintelligible.

Lenny cried, "I did so fast! So help me, I did."

Gray eyes, cold and probing, stared at him. "Then it is time to eat, no?" He talked in a low soothing voice. "Yom Kippur is finished till next year. Come, my son, eat."

Papa took a dead cigarette butt from the ash tray, lit it, carefully pawed at a spark floating down to his lap. He placed half a lump of sugar between his brittle yellow teeth, sipped tea from a saucer, his eyes never leaving Lenny's face.

Lenny sat down, "All right, I'll eat."

His voice, still soft, held a mocking note. "He'll do us a favor, Mama, and eat."

In a moment Mama came hurrying to the table, a plate

of chicken held gingerly in both her hands. "Eat. It is still warm."

"Hearty appetite," Papa said.

Lenny made the blessing for meat: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, by whose word all things exist."

After which, he chewed on a piece of white chicken. Suddenly the meat he loved had become dry and tasteless. He tried a piece of the dark meat. It was worse.

Abruptly he said to Papa, "I didn't mean to stay away from *shul* so long. I shouldn't've gone for a walk."

Papa poured tea from the glass into the saucer, lifted the saucer, sipped noisily.

"A walk," he said, "don't hurt. But the Delancey Street bums!"

"I forgot the time. . . ."

"With bums you don't walk."

"I should have watched the time."

In an impatient raspy voice, Papa said, "Understand me, you don't. A million years I talk and you understand nothing. The time you forgot. To come back you forgot. For that I don't kill nobody. A little punishment, maybe, but not to kill. But with bums to go around? For that, my dear son, I will cripple you. Understand me?"

Lenny pushed the plate away. His stomach was so full it hurt.

Papa said, "Every day in the paper I read. Bums like Frankie, like Lippy—he should get killed by a truck—Shlemie, the *momzer*, bums like that, robbing, killing."

"Oh, no, Papa," Lenny said quickly. "Not my friends."

"Friends! Listen to me, my son." Seriousness drew

Papa's mouth fine. "For you they are not. Let them go to hell alone. Company they don't need. You hear me, Leonard?" The blood was dark in his face. "Don't go with bums. Find friends. The whole East Side is not bums. Plenty fine, respectable boys and girls, if you open your eyes."

Mama's face was wrinkled, as if she were in pain. "Maybe we move."

Papa shook his head fiercely. "I got to move because my dear son can't stay away from tramps? Our life he is running?"

Mama drew a hand across her forehead in a tired gesture. "Maybe, a nicer neighborhood . . ."

"Woman's talk!" Papa exploded. "We got plenty crooks on Delancey Street and for every crook ten good boys."

"Mrs. Green's son in prison."

"And the Kalish boy a doctor and the DeMarco boy a judge and the Kalstein girl a lawyer. Ten for one. In a prison a boy don't have to finish his life, unless he wants. A boy wants to be good, he is good. He wants to be bad, Park Avenue or Broome Street, he got plenty trouble. Leonard, my son, understand me?"

Lenny nodded. "I want to be a lawyer, like Barbara Kalstein, a big lawyer."

"How, my son," his father cried, "how will you be a lawyer?"

The words came out in a rush. "High school, three more years, college, law school, I'll do it, Papa."

"They are not just words?" he cried.

"No, Papa. I'll do it. I can do it."

"And the bums?"

Suddenly the enthusiasm was gone, burnt out. "What

do you want from me, Papa? I bump into my friends in the street, what should I do, run?"

Papa slapped the table. "Like they got black plague."

Lenny choked over his words. "I'll try, Papa, honest to God, I'll try."

"Frankie, Shlemie, Lippy, the Dorfman boys, the Polack."

"All of them, see if I don't."

Papa got up from the table. He seemed so tired, as if the talk and the shouting had drained his strength.

"We see," he said gently. "You try . . . and I help you, my son. I do everything to help my boy. Even if I gotta cripple you, from the bums I help you keep away."

3.

THERE was excitement in the Kramer house that January Sunday evening. All day Mama washed and cleaned and long before that momentous evening, the house was as spotless as the day of a religious holiday. In the evening Mama set the table with a giant bowl of fruit, various home-made candies and delicacies. Only then, after a quick look at the alarm clock on the chipped wooden icebox, did Mama hurry to take off her apron and put on a clean house dress.

All because of Yetta and her feller.

Papa, reading a Hebrew textbook, said, "Such a business, like for a guest. Myron you saw a million times."

"In the street," she said. "Not in the house. A *chusen* my only daughter brings home, I should treat him like a stranger?"

Lenny helped himself to a square of sesame-seed candy. "Gee, this is good."

"In the kitchen," Mama said, "a whole plate."

Papa said, "And no blessing, like a bum."

Lenny looked down at his shoes. Still a bum. No matter what he did. . . . For five months he had avoided the gang. Meeting them in the streets, he'd said hello and walked on. Sometimes he'd ducked around corners to avoid them. Papa knew that, yet neither by word nor sign had he acknowledged the change in Lenny's behavior.

True, Papa didn't stare at Lenny in sullen silence, like he used to. And Papa seemed to have lost some of his brusqueness, and occasionally, as if Lenny were one of his colleagues in the synagogue he'd told him Jewish stories, recited parables, talked about the Talmud, explained Jewish civil and canonical laws contained in Mishnah, the text, and Gemara, the commentary. He talked, asked opinions, listened respectfully, then respectfully again ripped Lenny's interpretation to shreds with his own ideas as to the intent and meaning of the laws.

Lenny didn't mind that. Papa gave the same treatment to the men in the synagogue when, at the conclusion of the Sabbath prayer, they would sit around a rectangular table, eat herring and *chaleh*, drink home-made raisin whiskey and argue the Talmud.

He watched Mama set the tray of honeyed dough balls sprinkled with *moon* seeds. She looked up, caught his eye, smiled.

"One," she said, "no more."

He grinned, helped himself.

"Lenny, please, the icebox."

"That calls for another *tagel*."

He popped a ball into his mouth, licked the sticky fingers, glanced quickly at Papa to see if he'd noticed no blessing had been said. Busy with his thoughts, Papa wasn't paying attention. From under the icebox Lenny removed the pan, about filled to overflowing with ice water. Biting his lower lip in deep concentration, he carried the pan to the sink, dumped the water. The pan replaced in its accustomed place under the icebox, he returned to the living room.

Papa seemed annoyed over something. "All night you hang around the house? To the library you can't go?"

"It's Sunday." Anticipating the next question, he said, "I did my homework."

Mama said, "Maybe you go for a walk, huh, Lenny? Papa, a few cents give him."

Papa looked startled. "I robbed a bank?"

"A boy should have a few cents in his pockets."

"First *I* should have, then him. I come first. Gold mines I don't have. My grocery store I sold, remember?"

Three, four years ago Papa had owned a grocery store, two doors away from where they now lived on Broome Street. Business had been good but the store demanded more of his time, for as his sojourns with his fellow worshipers became more lengthy, Papa spent less and less time in the store. Although Mama took care of the store when Papa went to *shul*, alone she could not handle the customers with the same speed and ease as Papa. Somehow, especially during the winter months when Papa had to leave for the *shul* just before darkness, he was absent during the busiest hour of the day. People came in, saw Mama floundering around while other impatient customers still waited for service, turned and walked out. Business became bad.

When Papa was made the sexton in the *shul*, he sold the store. Later, when the new sexton came, Papa got a job as a clerk, with Mr. Berman, who'd bought Papa's grocery store.

Mama said, "Maybe you give him a few cents, he goes to a movie. All right, Lenny?"

Before he could answer, Papa said, "Money, money, money."

Lenny said, "I don't feel like going out; it's snowing."

Mama wiped her hands on her apron. "Home you should not stay so much. A boy got to have fresh air. Sit and read all day. Your friend, David, he don't come see you no more. And Kalman."

"Fine boys," Papa said, his face lighting up. "You go see them. Fine boys."

"Yeh," Lenny said dryly. "Fine boys."

"Better marks than you they get in school?"

"They're mental giants. A thousand per cent on every exam."

Papa's bushy eyebrows lifted. "You don't like them? For why?"

Lenny looked down at his hands clasped in his lap. "Who said I didn't?"

They're okay, Lenny thought, but not for me. Nice boys, but he just didn't care for them specially. Maybe they had no color. Sure, that's what it was. Somebody has color, you go for them. They haven't got it, they're just plain dull. Like the Yankees when DiMaggio busted fences for them. They had color. Every chance he'd get, he'd go up to the Stadium to watch them play. How many times had he gone on the hook from school, and, in his pocket sixty cents he'd saved from running errands for the fruit

man, had visited the Stadium. Sometimes he had the extra thirty cents for carfare, sometimes he'd waited until the change agent got busy, and ducked under the turnstile.

Then DiMaggio was gone and the Yankees had lost so much color not even Mantle or Yogi Berra could hold Lenny's interest.

David and Kalman didn't know the difference between a heavyweight and a flyweight boxer. They knew a little baseball, the teams and some of the players, but when it came to something interesting, like what's Turley's lifetime pitching record, they were the dumbest guys. All they could tell you about was Russia and Red China and what country would launch the first space satellite.

Creeps, but good, the direct opposite of the fellers in the Panthers. When you talked to the Panthers you felt free and easy. You got laughs. It was exciting listening to their stories, how they did this with one broad, how they got into a fight with a cop and threw his gun down a cellar, how they cut up the seats in the Academy because the manager once chased them out for peeing down from the balcony on the people in the orchestra.

Lenny didn't agree with what they did, nor, he told himself, did he want to get into the same kind of scrapes. . . . Yet, it was exciting.

Suddenly he realized how lonesome he was for their company.

Papa was yelling. "Lenny, I'm talking to you. Deaf you become?"

"I don't have to go any place. I got a book I wanna read."

"A few cents," Mama said.

Papa hesitated, yanked out his small purse, flipped it

open. "Maybe you can find a movie for a quarter? Thirty cents?"

"I don't wanna go," Lenny said.

Papa slapped the table. "Go! Yetta's *chusen* will come soon."

Resentfully, Lenny said, "What you trying to do, get rid of me?"

"You don't want to go to the movies?"

"No."

Papa's expression changed from incredulity to anger. "I say yes. You hear me? Out the house." He opened a tin box, took out a cigarette butt, lit it. Blowing out the match, he looked at Lenny through the smoke. His tone was gentler. "Anyhow, Mama and me, we don't stay either comes the boy, we go visit Mrs. Shlossman."

Mama was aghast. "A boy and a girl you don't leave alone in a house."

"What are they, babies? Foolish woman."

The door opened and his sister Yetta came in, the shawl on her head covered with snow. Snowflakes had left moist spots on her faintly rouged cheeks.

"Hi," she sang, removing the shawl so quickly, the wet snow sprayed over the linoleum floor. Her dark hair was flat on her head, dozens of bobby pins sticking out. Yetta was tall and lean, somewhat flat-chested.

Lenny studied her hair. "Some plaster job."

Greenish-gray eyes laughed at him. "I have to comb it out, silly."

"Just to catch a guy."

"Some guy. You'll see."

"I never seen Myron? A million times. . . ."

Papa said, "Good. So now to see him you don't have to wait. Take. Fifty cents for movies."

Yetta eyed her father askance. "Seventy-four cents, Papa."

"The movies should drop dead. . . . Here, seventy-four cents."

Lenny said, "Keep it."

Yetta touched his arm in a gesture of affection. "Maybe next time, Lenny."

"I don't care if I never meet the guy."

"I thought you saw him?"

"In the street, yeh."

"Papa," she said, "why can't Myron meet the whole family instead of three-quarters?"

Papa shrugged. "Let him stay, let him stay."

"Don't do me no favor," Lenny cried. "I don't have to meet him. I don't have to meet anybody."

"A child is a child," Mama said.

Papa growled. "A crazy child. He knows what he wants? I should live so, in a minute gives the strap."

Lenny went into the hall closet, yanked his mackinaw jacket off the metal hanger. As he slipped into the jacket, he saw Mama put an arm around his sister.

"A bride," Mama said proudly. "Soon maybe I be a *buba* with six grandchildren."

Yetta laughed. "Don't rush things, Mama. I'm not even engaged."

Papa got up from his favorite chair. "With Mama's mouth everything is quick." He kissed Yetta's forehead. "But before you know it, it's here, children, grandchildren. Like a dream. . . ."

Resentment grew inside Lenny, a creepy cold tightness clamped in his throat. Look at them, kissing, hugging her. And the way they laugh! Like kids mushing it up. They'd never kissed him, held him, not as long as he could remember. Maybe, when he was too little to fight them off they'd forgotten he was a boy and boys don't like mush. . . .

He cried, "You gonna let me go through?"

They turned, startled for a moment.

Papa's voice was brusque. "That's how you talk in this house? No respect?"

"I just wanna get through . . . and you're in the way."

Papa raised his hand in a backward motion. "Maybe a knock on the head will learn you respect?"

Lenny looked down at his shoes. In a low dead voice, he said, "Just let me through, Papa. Please let me pass."

Yetta said, "Lenny, you're being silly."

Emphasizing each word, he said, "I don't wanna see Myron. I just wanna get out of here."

Papa waved a finger in his face. "Leonard, I got needles for you. I save it up and next time I take the strap to you, nobody will interfere. Leonard . . . Leonard!"

In a sudden rush, Lenny crossed the room, opened the door and ran. Later, he knew, he stood a good chance of catching a couple cuffs on the ears for going out of the house while Papa was still talking. At the moment he didn't care.

The snow came down in an endless broken veil, covering his bare head, wetting his face. A car skidded, turned the corner slowly, carefully. A policeman came out of a hallway, opened the police phone box attached to the corner post. People walked, heads down against the snow, and Lenny had to sidestep them lest he be bowled over.

From his house on Broome Street it was just one short block to Delancey Street, where the Loew's advertised Lana Turner's latest picture. He stopped to look at the movie stills tacked inside the glass frames. For a moment he wished he'd taken the money from Papa. Then, angry at himself for his thoughts, he cried, "Who needs his money?"

A young woman said, "You talkin' to me?"

He gave her a look, walked on. Maybe he should send Frankie to answer her. She was Frankie's speed. Why was he thinking of Frankie? Why shouldn't he? Frankie was a nice guy despite what Papa thought. What did Papa know? Understanding the Talmud didn't make Papa an expert on good boys and bad boys. Who should know better than Lenny Kramer what kind of a guy Frankie was? After all, hadn't Lenny Kramer hung out long enough with Frankie to know him?

Frankie was a regular guy, but he could get you in trouble. Like that time up on the roof. . . .

He and Frankie, that winter night a couple years ago. . . . Frankie found some loose bricks which had come out of the chimney. Laughing like a hopped-up cokie, Frankie heaved the bricks clear across the street, right through the windows in Reb Holstein's tenement house. Even as Lenny, shaking from fright, cried, "You crazy or something?" Frankie heaved two more half-bricks, this time pitching perfect strikes through Reb Holstein's own apartment windows.

There was the breaking of glass and then a woman's scream cut abruptly short.

Laughing like a crazy guy, Frankie ran across the Suffolk Street roofs to the end of the block, Lenny at his

heels. Downstairs, they could see the crowd gathered before Reb Holstein's building. Before Lenny could run from the scene, Frankie took his arm.

"They got nothing on us. I just wanna see Reb's face. That'll learn the bastard ratting to the cops just because we shot a little crap in his back yard."

They stayed in the crowd and soon an ambulance came up the street, a decrepit ambulance with *Gouverneur Hospital* printed in big letters on its side. Reb Holstein's little girl, Ida, was carried out in her father's arms and placed inside the ambulance. The girl had a big bandage around her head that made her frightened face seem bloodless.

Frankie cursed his luck. "Why couldn't it've been Reb who got it? Anyway, that'll learn him. . . ."

4.

LENNY stopped before the basement cellar on Clinton Street. A block-lettered metal sign riveted to the brownstone stoop said: DELANCEY PANTHERS. Snow had whipped against the sign almost completely covering the lettering, but he knew what it said.

A few months ago he'd heard the boys had clubrooms. Since then he'd gone past this basement, curiosity drawing him like a magnet to see the rooms. But he'd fought off the feeling and gone on his way.

This was the third time. Now he knew, no matter what, he would go inside. He had to see the guys. He just couldn't hold out any longer. Just for a few minutes, long enough to get a couple laughs.

A voice said from behind him, "You coming in or you staying out in the snow?"

Blinking against the snow, he stared at the tall, hunched figure. Recognition came slowly. "Frankie? Frankie boy, how y' doin', Frankie?"

"Okay, okay. C'mon inside, Doc. How come you ain't been around?"

He followed Frankie down the four steps, passed the grilled iron door into the building.

Shaking off the snow, he said, "Those teachers, piling on the homework."

Frankie gave him a quick look out of his long blond lashes, "Yeh," Frankie said dryly, "the teachers and your old man. For Chris' sakes, Doc, when you gonna grow up and stop lettin' your old man push you around? Sixteen and your old man still bangs you around."

"I'm not sixteen," he said lamely. "Anyway, he ain't touched me in a long time. We goin' in or do we hold a meeting out here?"

Frankie looked good, handsome as ever. He seemed different, more grown up. The same clothes, dungarees and sweat shirt and leather jacket, but different somehow.

Frankie took off his pearl-gray felt hat, shook it. Lenny stared at the hat. Yuss Wacks had one just like it. He laughed to himself. On the East Side every big shot and his imitator wore a pearl-gray hat, big as a cowboy's. Frankie brushed back his hair, slick and shiny, curled in the front, long in the back, like the tail of a duck. . . .

Frankie pushed open the door marked *Members Only*. One dim red bulb stuck out of a socket on the wall. Lenny could feel rather than see people in the room. Frankie flicked on a table lamp. Voices called out in greeting.

Around a table in the center of the room sat two boys and two girls drinking beer. The two boys jumped up, let loose with loud exultant howls.

"Doc, you bastard, where you been?"

Grinning sheepishly, Lenny said hello to Artie and Cheesy Dorfman, sixteen-year-old twins who'd joined the Panthers while he'd been away.

"I didn't know you guys got in."

In unison, as if rehearsed, they rolled up their right sleeves, displayed the tattooed black panther on the biceps. The two-inch snarling panther sat on its haunches, ready to spring, white teeth gleaming.

Frankie said, "See, Doc, pretty? A guy ain't a Panther less he's got a cockamamie on his right arm."

Lenny shrugged. "I told you a million times I can't do it. My old man'd rip my arm off."

"A guy is a Panther or he ain't."

"We gonna start that again? Hi, Joe."

Joe Kusack moved from where he sat on the couch with a fifteen-year-old blonde. "Hi y' douchin', Doc?"

Cheesy Dorfman, brown eyes crinkled at the edges, said, "With his old lady's douche bag, what else."

The corners of the long rectangular room were full of shadows. In the far corner, he could see the outlines of a boy on a club chair, a girl curled in his arm. At least, she looked like a girl.

Lenny felt a mounting excitement he couldn't understand. "Since when the Panthers got girls?"

"Debs," Frankie said, hanging up his jacket on the wooden hanger. "Gimme your coat, Doc. PANTHER DEBS the broads got on their sport jackets. All the big clubs got 'em. The Debs can give us a hand, case we need 'em."

"For what?" Artie Dorfman said. "Hold y' head up when you go to the toilet?"

"That's bad?" Frankie said. "Hey, Lippy, you gonna stay in that chair all night?"

He reached out, flicked on the ceiling lights. The boy, sitting in the club chair, yelled out an obscene word. The girl jumped up, pulled at her skirt, tucked in her blouse.

"Frankie," the fifteen-year-old redhead said, "how'd you like it if we done it to you?"

Lippy Valentine cried, "A couple more minutes woulda killed you?"

Frankie slapped at the wall switch and the ceiling lights went off. "Go on and finish the job," he said resignedly. "There's a cot in the kitchen. Take your piece of ass in there."

The girl cried, "Who y' think you're talkin' to, Frankie?"

Frankie waved his hand. "Stop makin' a Fed case out of nothin'. You ain't a piece? Then maybe it's Lippy."

Lippy said, "Wise guy Frankie."

Frankie said, disgustedly, "You don't like it, quit. I'm runnin' this place."

Lippy said, "It ain't that, Frankie. Bella is my girl."

Frankie turned his back on them. "How y'like it, Doc? C'mon, sit on the couch."

They sat down near Joe Kusack and the blond girl, stretched out their legs. Lippy Valentine was having trouble with his girl. Evidently she hadn't liked Lippy's mild defense of her honor. They argued, then she stormed over to the clothes rack, yanked off her frayed green cloth coat. Lippy got his leather jacket and made the door just in time to keep it from slamming in his face.

Frankie said, "One a these days, I'm gonna bust that cokie. Everytime he needs a charge, he gets cross."

Joe Kusack took his girl's hand, walked with her across the floor, to the back of the clubroom. Lenny caught a glimpse of a gas stove as Joe flicked on the light. Without hesitation, the girl went into the room. The light went off and the door slammed closed.

Frankie said, "You know Sade Murphy? Yeh, she's Joe's girl."

One of the girls at the table looked around and at Frankie's beckoning motion, got up, moving across the room as quickly as the tight-fitting skirt permitted. She ran her fingers through the reddish-blond hair hanging in curls around her shoulders.

Thick red lips spread in a big smile, she said, "Hi, Frankie."

He nodded in Lenny's direction. "You know Doc Kramer? This is Betty Cole, Doc, she's a regular broad. For me, she'd do anything. Right, Bet?"

She smiled demurely. "For you, Frankie."

His smile took things for granted. "My friend Doc is a regular guy. You and him should say hello."

"Hello," Lenny said, shifting uncomfortably, wondering at the new excitement that made his thighs quiver.

Blue eyes looked him over slowly, deliberately. "He's a nice boy. I wouldn't mind."

The fullness in him was unbearable, yet he didn't want it to stop.

He tried to conceal the turmoil going on inside him. "Aah, you're jail bait."

"I'm fourteen, fifteen almost," she said pouting.

"And good," Frankie said, "as a sixteen-year broad."

"Aah," Lenny said.

Frankie chuckled. "It ain't Doc's fault, Bet." He looked at her bosom. "You look like you got ping pong balls in there."

Lenny said, "Yeh, and I don't play ping pong."

"Funny, ain'tcha," she said, tossing her head.

Frankie patted her buttocks. "For me, you're okay." He looked at Lenny. "I tell you she's good."

Lenny could feel the blood flowing through his veins, thickening, tingling. Sooner or later, he knew, it had to happen. He couldn't postpone the show of manhood forever. That time they were thirteen and Frankie had pulled that drunken girl onto the back of a truck, the cop had come just when it had been Lenny's turn. At the moment he'd been grateful. However, later, alone with his thoughts, he'd wished there'd been no cop. Then he would have known what it was like.

The following summer Frankie had picked up that farmer's kid from the sticks. The dark-haired girl had run away from home and somehow Frankie had befriended her, brought her to the block. They'd used Lippy Valentine's flat, Lippy's mother having gone to a movie. Frankie had gone into the bedroom and come out dancing, then Artie and Cheesy Dorfman, one at a time, then twelve-year-old Keno Blake from Houston Street, and finally Lippy. Now it was Lenny's turn and with all eyes on him, he'd feigned illness. They'd looked at each other, winked shrewdly. Smart guys . . .

Now . . .

Lenny said, "You're okay, Betty. I'm just not in the mood."

Frankie had that wise look in his eyes. "What's that gotta do with it?"

Then, as if in answer to his silent prayer, there was a sudden commotion from behind the closed door. A girl screamed, cried out something harsh and dirty—a dull thud, a youth swearing.

Shaking his head sadly, Frankie got up from the couch. "He's at it again, that Polack creep."

Opening the door, Frankie put his hand inside, flooding the kitchen with bright light. Lenny, who had followed Frankie, was pushed into the room by the others storming behind him, almost knocking over Frankie.

The blond boy turned, hot words on his lips. "Everybody back to what they was doing. This ain't a circus."

Lenny wasn't so sure. Sade was on the floor, her skirt above her knees. A hand pressed against her mouth from where bright-red blood ran down in a thin line, she looked up at the stocky Joe Kusack.

Frankie said, "For cryin' out tears, you at it again?"

Joe Kusack stood over her breathing raggedly through an open mouth. "Butt out of this, Frankie."

Frankie gave him an apologetic smile. "A guy can't sleep around here, you two making noise."

Sade fingered her white blouse, torn at the shoulder. "That muscle-bound Polack, all he knows is hit, hit, hit."

Joe growled deep in his throat. "Don't call me Polack."

Gray pallor lay beneath the heavily rouged face. "Hit, hit, hit. One of these days . . ."

Joe laughed harshly. "You'll take a mouthful of piss and spit at me."

"You'll never come near me again."

There was wicked anger in his eyes. "I'll whistle and you'll come."

She got up from the floor. "You could've knocked out all my teeth. Then you'd be satisfied."

Joe stared, blinked his eyes, wiped his hands on his trousers. "Yeh," he said, "yeh . . ." He watched her open a blue handbag she'd picked up from the cot, extract a square mirror. He said, shrugging, "One touch and I gotta bite on somethin'."

"Bite yourself," she spat the words. "I'll get a cancer from you. Bite, then I holler and he hits." There was defiance mixed with fear in back of the blue eyes. "Never again, Joe. You could kill me with one punch. Then what'm I supposed to tell my mother?"

Lenny laughed. "He kills you, you don't have to tell her nothing."

Joe waved at him. "Butt out, Doc."

Frankie said, "Tell your old lady you got that lip from walking into a door."

Joe snickered. "Her old lady knows the score. She gets a shiner every week down at Mendel's."

She wheeled on him, ready to swing. "You leave my mother alone. She's good, decent. Just because she's got friends in a bar and grill and sits in there because she's lonesome . . ."

"Sure," Frankie said, slipping an arm around her waist. "We know, Sade." He shifted his feet, moving close to her. "Maybe I should take you home?"

Joe Kusack's voice trembled as he spoke. "Take your goddam hands off." He whipped out a knife, pressed the metal button, six inches of steel glistened.

Frankie stiffened, turned to look at the youth standing

hot and dangerous a yard away. Tension was born in the room. Lenny could feel his pulses begin to race. The silence was suddenly oppressive, heavy as lead. Sade's eyes moved from one to the other, her teeth down over her lip to keep it still.

Frankie broke first. Releasing his hold on the girl, he stepped back. "You don't have to pull a shank on me, Joe."

"She's my broad," Joe said. "Nobody touches her, you, God, nobody."

Frankie nodded. "I didn't know you two was steady."

Sade clasped her hands together in a gesture of prayer. "No, Joe, please. I don't wanna go steady. I'm only fifteen . . ."

"I didn't ask you," he said, pocketing the knife. "I'm tellin' you."

Frankie laughed but there was no humor in his eyes. "If that's how it is, I'll bang out any man who says different."

Face etched in bleak misery, she cried, "Joe, have a heart! I'll go out with you once in a while. I even won't say a word if you hit me."

Joe said, "Shut y'hole," and went out of the kitchen into the clubroom.

Sade looked at Frankie, then at Lenny, a mute plea in her eyes. Suddenly she swept up her bag, ran out of the room.

Frankie said softly, "That big dumb Polack . . ."

When they returned to the clubroom, Sade was gone and Joe Kusack was brooding on the couch. As Lenny sat down beside him, he looked up.

There was a grief-stricken look in his eyes as he said, apologetically, "One touch and I gotta smack her around."

Lenny said, "You used to shy away from broads. All of a sudden you're going steady."

"One touch . . ."

Frankie said, "It's nine o'clock. We go eat soon, Joe."

The hall door opened with such violence it bounded off the wall. Frankie wheeled, his hand at his hip pocket. At the same instant Joe Kusack came up on his feet, crouching, his switchblade knife in his right hand. A flick of his wrist and the blade shot out.

Three boys stopped short in the doorway. Eyes rolling, they mumbled, "It's me, Turk . . . Fatso . . . Pal."

Frankie's voice shook with exasperation. "Next time you go bustin' in like this . . . ! How do we know it ain't the Counts or the Vikings making war?"

Joe Kusack looked disappointed. "I thought maybe we was gettin' a little action." Slowly, he closed the knife, slipped it into his pocket.

Lenny said, "You get caught with a switch, you get a rap. They got a new law."

Joe threw out his left fist in a jab, at the same instant slapping his extending arm with his right hand. "This for your goddam laws." He turned on the three thirteen-year-old boys. "You dopes gonna close the door or you tryin' to get us pneumonia or somethin'? What the hell you got there, Fatso?"

For the first time Lenny saw the square wooden box in the hand of the thin Fatso.

"Chalk," he said, "a load of chalk."

Lenny said, "What you gonna do with all that chalk?"

The boy looked puzzled. "Play with it, I guess."

Joe Kusack laughed. "Play with it? That's what you been doin' all y'life, playin' with it."

Frankie said, "You bust into the school again!"

The boy they called Turk hung his head. "We had nothin' to do."

"A lousy box of chalk!"

Pal said, "We got books too. Only we torn 'em up and t'rew 'em in a ashcan. That bitch Miss Stars and me is even now. You shoulda see what we done to her room, ink all over the place, busted desks. Then we pissed and crapped right on her desk."

Joe Kusack showed interest. "Yeh? Geez, I shoulda been there. You couldn't call me? I didn't tell you next time you go schoolbustin' lemme in on it?"

Frankie groaned. "Still a kid."

Joe pointed a finger at him. "Better than lead pipin'. I get no real kicks swipin' pipes."

"At least you make a buck."

Lenny said, "You the guys ripped out the sink lead pipes in the empty apartment on the fourth floor in my building?"

Frankie shrugged. "What's the diff?"

Lenny snapped, "My old lady had a helluva job cleaning water that came down from the ceiling."

Frankie jerked a thumb in Joe's direction. "Ask him. He gets kicks lettin' the water run after he rips the pipes out."

Lenny said, "Next time pick another building, yeh?"

Joe Kusack wasn't listening. "You know what school I'd like t'bust into? Seward. They got some chem lab. Hey, Frankie, remember once we got into the chem lab up in Stuyvesant? We sure had fun. Explosions. Real atom bombs. We sure wrecked the joint."

Hands on hips, Frankie faced the three boys. "Lemme set you straight. We ain't lookin' for trouble. Next time

you play kid stuff, don't come runnin' down here." He slapped the chalk box. "A cop finds this hot stuff down here and we gotta close up."

Joe said, "You get grabbed, you get a slap on the wrist on account of you're juveniles. A lousy rap in Children's Court for j.d. We don't do so bad neither, but if we're gonna get a break, it might as well be for somethin' big. The first break is on the house. After that, we got a stir rap maybe."

Lenny said, "Break in the head."

Joe Kusack sneered. "Doc knows everythin'. You know what a y.o. is?"

Lenny pretended to yawn. "Ask me something hard."

Frankie said, "Youthful offender. Doc is a j.d. on account of he's under sixteen. Joe and me, we're youths. We get grabbed for stealing or even somethin' big like a stickup we don't get tried like regular criminals. No sir, we get y.o. treatment and we get put on probation."

Joe said, "Like I said, the first rap is on the house."

Frankie laughed. "So what we got to lose?"

Lenny said, "What happens the second time you get pinched?"

A worried little flicker hurried across Frankie's face. "We could get a break again. Depends. Anyway, I'll worry about it then." He pointed to the chalk box. "You guys get rid of the lousy crap and wash your hands. Then you can come hang around here."

Turk cried, "What for I gotta wash my hands?"

"You got ink and chalk on them. There's plenty snow outside, rub it in good. Dump the chalk a block away, you understand? A block away, two blocks."

Watching the sullen boys go out the door, Frankie

shook his head sadly. "Dumb creeps. They'll never get the Panther on their right arms, the way they use their heads. Where's Shlemie?"

Joe Kusack stared into space. "In my pocket."

"You gonna forget that broad for a couple hours?"

"Broad?" Joe looked puzzled. "Sade?" He drew a long quivering breath. "I'll take care of her. Here's Shlemie now."

Even since Shlemie Cohen had passed his sixteenth birthday, he walked with a prouder air. Shoulders straight, chest thrown out, he seemed to be daring the world to take a sock at his chin. The heavy paratrooper's boots gave him a tough, militaristic look. That was how he impressed Lenny.

"Hi," he said. "Hey, Doc, it's you? Where's Lippy?"

Frankie looked around. "Hey, Cheesy—Artie, you seen Lip?"

"He was here a couple minutes ago. Musta gone out."

"That figures," Lenny said.

Shlemie's dark eyes flashed. "My old lady got the ball and chain on me. Locked me in a bedroom, like I was a con. So she goes to work and me, I climb down the fire escape. Imagine lockin' me in! Suppose we had a fire or somethin'?" He looked at Lenny. "Your old man and my old lady oughta get together."

Lenny laughed. "My old lady wouldn't like it."

Joe Kusack was impatient. Cracking his knuckles, he said, "We goin' or we goin'?"

Frankie frowned. "That Lippy! Maybe we should take the Dorfmans."

Joe shook his head. In a whisper heard round the room,

he said, "Nah! How about Doc here? He can take Lippy's place."

Lenny shied away. "Nobody can take Lippy's place, whatever it is you got planned."

Frankie grinned. "Eat, Doc, we plan to pack away a Chinese meal."

Relieved, Lenny said, "You know I don't eat that stuff."

Shlemie laughed. "You don't know what's good. C'mon, Doc, a nice plate of kosher pork'll just hit the spot."

Frankie put his arm around Lenny's shoulder. "Just keep us company. Maybe you can have a fruit salad."

Lenny hesitated. All eyes were on him as if their going depended on his answer. "Okay," he said, "I'll just watch you eat."

5.

On the way to the Mott Street Chinese restaurant, they overturned every metal ashcan careless janitors had left out in the snow, flinging the covers out into the gutter. By turns, they walked, ran, stopped to wrestle each other into the snow, packed fistfuls of snow to throw at squealing girls.

It was exactly ten o'clock when they went down a flight of stairs and entered the Fong Low restaurant.

The manager came forward, his welcome smile freezing as his eyes swept the four youths. The Chinese bartender behind the bar stopped wiping a glass.

"Maybe you boys eat 'cross street," he said. "Nice place."

Frankie was insulted. "We got money."

Joe glowered. "What the hell makes you so high class? Table for four and make it snappy."

The manager hesitated, bowed, motioned them to follow him. In a far corner of the cellar, away from the other diners, he showed them to a circular table.

Frankie looked around at the well-dressed customers. "What you looking at?"

Smiling, the customers turned back to their food. The boys pulled out chairs and sat down.

Lenny began to remove his coat. "You guys eat with your coats on?"

"Don't take it off," Shlemie said. "Case we don't like the stuff, we can go someplace else." He began to laugh. "Maybe they don't serve kosher chow mein."

A gray-haired waiter, walking as if the silverware and napkins were rounding his shoulders, came over to set the table. Frankie dropped a pack of cigarettes on the table and the boys helped themselves. After lighting his cigarette, Frankie passed the matches around.

Lenny said, "How come you guys don't go to the Pageant?"

Joe chuckled. "They got lousy *gefüllte* fish." He picked up the ketchup bottle, emptied the contents in the sugar bowl.

Frankie shook his head. "You know I don't like ketchup in my sugar."

"I'll fix it," Joe said, unscrewing the salt and pepper shakers, upending the shakers over the sugar. "Now it's just right."

Lenny shifted uneasily in his seat. "They'll throw us out of here."

"They can't," Shlemie said. "We're citizens, ain't we?"

They're begging for trouble, Lenny thought. This business with the sugar bowl . . . and not hanging up their coats. Maybe I'd better take a walk.

Methodically cutting a cloth napkin with a knife, Joe said, "Shlemie, how many languages you know? You talk Algebra?"

"Huh?" Shlemie killed his cigarette on the white-and-red-checkered tablecloth. "What the hell's that?"

"Doc, talk Algebra."

Lenny said, "Stop pulling my pants down."

"No kiddin'," Joe said. "Just a couple words."

"A square plus b square equals twenty-five."

Shlemie stared wide-eyed. "What's it mean?"

"Tell 'im, Doc," Joe said.

Lenny waved his hand. "Stop bothering people."

Frankie said, "So what? Joe talks Chinese."

"Yeh," Joe said, looking around him. "Hey, One Lung," he called to the approaching waiter. "One ball hung low."

A gleam of watchfulness in his dark eyes, the waiter lifted his pad and pencil. Without any trace of accent, he said, "What would you gentlemen like to order?"

Frankie snorted. "Gentlemen? He don't mean us. Four shots of rye."

The waiter smiled. "Sorry. No whiskey. We are not permitted to serve minors under eighteen years of age."

Joe cried, "What you Chinks doing, drinking the stuff yourself? Four ryes and make it snappy."

Lenny's mouth was very dry all of a sudden. The boys hadn't come here to eat. They wanted trouble. He leaned back in his chair, the tension tight in his belly.

Joe said, "Let's order. I'm hungry."

"No," Frankie said. "I see people drinking. We're people."

Joe said, "Lobster, cantonese style."

Shlemie said, "Pork ends, kosher style."

Lenny shook his head. "Nothing, thanks."

Joe slapped the table. "You gotta order something."

Lenny smiled. "Glass of water and a toothpick."

"I wanna drink," Frankie said. "Rye."

The waiter stood expressionless, his eyes fixed on Frankie.

Joe was pleading. "Frankie, let's eat first . . ."

"No," Frankie said.

Abruptly the waiter turned on his heel and left. They watched him talk with the manager.

Frankie said, "We could take this joint. Bet there's a couple hundred bucks in that register."

Lenny got up, almost upsetting his chair. "Wait'll I get on the other side of the door."

"Sit down," Joe said disgustedly. "We ain't heisting the place. I'm starved, there's a big hole in my belly."

The waiter returned, set a large teapot and cups on the table. "Lobster," he said, "pork ends, that's all."

"Rye," Frankie said. "Don't forget the goddam rye." He got half out of his seat. "See what happens when I don't get a drink?" His eyes rolled. "Gotta have a drink, gotta." His tongue hung out and his breathing became ragged.

Shlemie cried, "Quick, get him a drink. When he gets like this, he goes wacky. He once killed a guy. Hurry up! Too late."

Almost before Lenny could get out from under the ta-

ble, Frankie reached down, upended it. The tea, cups and silverware crashed to the floor.

"I'm crazy," Frankie shrieked. "And it's all your fault. I'm gonna sue you."

The manager came running, grasped his arm. "Stop, please."

Joe Kusack slugged him from behind. The manager went down, sprawling. Waiters hurried over. Quickly, Frankie stepped over the prostrate manager.

Right hand inside his coat pocket, Frankie shouted, "Stay put or I'll give you a slug right up your yellow ass."

A woman screamed, tried to get out of her chair, suddenly collapsing to the floor. The rest of the diners sat frozen. Lenny, about to turn and run out of the restaurant, stood watching in horrible fascination as Joe Kusack and Shlemie went to work on the manager. While Joe's heavy shoes stomped the man's face into a bloody mess, Shlemie's paratrooper boots landed with sickening thuds between the man's legs.

Lenny's stomach heaved and turned. The sourness came up in his throat. He looked blindly about him, feeling desperate and trapped, the way he'd felt up there on the roof when Frankie had thrown those bricks into Reb Holstein's window. He had to get away before the cops came and took them all to jail. . . .

A waiter, unable to stand and watch, came at Shlemie with a steak knife. Lips flat against strong teeth, Shlemie picked up a chair, caught the man on the side of the head. The man sprawled. Before he could get up, Shlemie had kicked him unconscious.

Frankie was tranquil and composed. "Okay, let's blow." He pushed Joe Kusack away from the bloody hulk.

"Don't kill him." His voice rose for everybody to hear. "Maybe we'll be back with fifty guys. Next time everybody gets it."

Joe Kusack took a last kick at the manager, then turned his back on everybody and walked slowly to the street door. Frankie and Shlemie were more careful, backing to the door. Lenny, moving in a half-daze, groped his way past them. He heard a grunt, turned just in time to see Frankie heave a sugar bowl against the bar mirror. The crash and the bedlam that followed was deafening.

A woman was hysterical.

"I'm gonna vomit," Lenny murmured. "I gotta throw up."

"Outside," Frankie said. "There's more room."

With a quick movement, Frankie pushed him up the steps. Out in the street, Frankie said, "Take it easy. You run and a cop'll grab us."

The snow had stopped falling, and in the gutter the whiteness was turning to a grayish mud. They walked quickly, turned into Pell Street.

Frankie chuckled. "You see those guys, yellow chickens."

Sullenly, Joe Kusack cried, "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"What I done?"

"Another half hour would a killed you?"

"Why wait?"

"Goddam hurry."

"What you sore about, Joe?"

"The meal, the goddam meal, lobster and stuff. You couldn't a waited till we packed the stuff away? A meal on the arm hurts?"

Shlemie said, "All of a sudden I lost my appetite."

Lenny pictured the men on the floor, the manager, his face a bloody pulp, Shlemie kicking him between the legs until the guy's bag must've been ripped off. The tautness of anger grew in his chest.

"You guys are too damn smart."

Joe Kusack smacked his lips. "Lobsters, egg rolls, pork. That Frankie and his goddam hurry. You hadda go someplace, maybe?"

Frankie wasn't listening to him. He had heard Lenny's complaint and for some reason deemed it more important to answer him.

"You didn't get hurt, Doc, so what's the beef?"

Lenny pulled at his mackinaw collar, protection against the wind poking cold fingers around his neck.

"Don't gimme that, Frankie. I was had and you know it. That rumble was no accident."

Frankie didn't bother to deny it. "Okay, so it was planned. I always said you was a smart guy."

"Don't con me, Frankie."

Shlemie said, "Frankie let's you make a sawbuck and you're kicking?"

"Sawbuck? I don't get it. Wait a minute! Frankie, you working for Yuss Wacks?" Gray eyes shining with anger, he stopped in front of Frankie. "I like to know who my boss is."

Joe Kusack suddenly rolled a garbage can across the sidewalk, out into the gutter. A car tried to avoid it, ran half up the sidewalk. His hand on the door handle, the driver took one look at the boys, decided against coming out.

Frankie said, "Come on, mister. I'm just itching to go to

work on somebody. You guys had all the fun." He turned suddenly to Lenny, "For cryin' out loud, what's the difference who pays the ten bucks? Okay, so it's Yuss."

"Why me, Frankie? You knew I'd be of no use to you, not when I didn't know the score."

Joe Kusack said, "We didn't need you to help. If we did, you'd a come out of it. We seen you in rumbles, Doc. You hold your own. Anyway, we didn't have Lippy and we needed four guys, just for show."

Lenny said, "There must be another reason, Frankie."

Frankie seemed to weigh each word carefully. "So what happens if we tell you the score? You don't go. Right? So you lose yourself a easy ten bucks."

Schlemie said, "Aw, why don't you go home and suck y'mama's titty?"

In a sudden burst of rage, Lenny turned on Shlemie, threw a right-hand punch that caught Shlemie on the side of the head. Shlemie went over, rolled. When he sat up, his face was covered with muddy snow. Frankie and Joe laughed heartily, pointing, taunting the boy in the gutter.

Lenny watched Shlemie spit out a mouthful, then he too burst into laughter. Frankie slapped his back.

"You're okay, Doc. For my dough, you're okay."

"Take a gas pipe," Lenny said, the anger returning. "You roped me into this deal tonight so I'd see how easy it is to make ten bucks. After tonight, you figured, I'd come begging to make more dough."

"We was lookin' out for your benefit," Joe said.

"Look out for somebody else. Just leave me alone. I don't like wise guys pulling fast ones."

The Delancey Street traffic was quite heavy despite the snow. More people were out now, youths making snowballs, firing them around.

Joe Kusack said, "Hey, look, I'm a traffic cop."

Deliberately walking across the gutter, into the stream of traffic, he called out, "Come on, hit me. I dare you, hit me."

Schlemie yelled, "You crazy Polack."

A car missed Joe by inches. A sedan stopped short just in time to avoid hitting him, causing the coupe behind to crash into it. In split seconds there was the sound of crashing steel as cars piled into each other in a long stream. A man cried out in agony, a woman screamed.

The traffic cop at the bridge raced across the snow to where six cars had been involved in the accident. Bursting with anger, he glanced around for the youth he'd seen jaywalking.

The boys found Joe Kusack waiting for them outside the clubrooms. Eyes wide with innocence, Joe said, "Hi, fellers, what's new?"

"You crazy Polack," Frankie said. "You shoulda seen them cars."

Squatting, Joe began to make a snowball. "Who you callin' a Polack? One a these days, Frankie . . . Maybe we oughtta go downstairs. Yuss Wacks'll be here for the payoff."

"So long," Lenny said.

"You got ten bucks comin' to you."

"I want no part of it. I take that ten, I'm in, same as you. Just forget I was there, okay?"

"*I'm* crazy?" Joe Kusack laughed. "What's him?"

"*Meshuggeh*," Shlemie said. "That means he's real gone."

Joe Kusack flung the snowball at the lighted bulb hanging from the lamp post, missed. "I guess you'll never be a Panther, Doc. In a million years. . . ."

Lying on his folding cot near the black gas range, Lenny tossed and turned. He heard Mama snoring, Papa's whistling breathing which sounded as if he were having one of his asthmatic attacks. His sister, Yetta, was still downstairs, presumably where he'd seen her over an hour ago near the steam radiator in the stairwell. The alarm clock on the shelf over the stove ticked loudly.

I gotta stay away from the gang, I gotta stay out of trouble.

He pressed the army blanket against his ears to keep out the tick. Now, through the pillow, he could hear his pulse beat.

I will stay away, I must. Tonight I almost got in a real jam. Prison, maybe.

A shudder ran through him. Years ago, Miss Johnson, his fourth-grade teacher, had locked him in the clothes closet. He'd never forgotten how frightened he'd been, pounding on the door, demanding to be let out, then begging, crying like a three-year-old. . . . And prison was worse, a million times worse, four walls and barred doors and windows and nobody lets you out, nobody can once the judge sentences you.

I'll have nothing to do with Frankie . . . Joe . . . the gang.

He swung his feet to the bare floor, took the penny key from the hook over the sink. From Papa's tin box, he filched a cigarette butt, enough for half a dozen quick puffs, and a pack of matches. He opened the hall door, listened, then quickly, in his bare feet and shorts, hurried though the long hallway to the toilet on the landing. He shivered against the cold as he put the key into the door, opened it. He heard his sister's giggle, leaned over the railing to look down into the well. All he could see was the tip of Yetta's left shoe, Myron's big tan canal boats. He went into the toilet, pulled the cord, the fifteen-watt bulb casting a sickly yellow light.

He sat there, arms clasped over his lap for warmth, untangling them only for a puff on the cigarette. He saw the new poem written in pencil on the dirty buff-colored walls. That crazy Tony kid next door was always digging up new wisecracks. With his fingertips, Lenny erased the scrawl.

He reached behind him to drop the butt into the bowl.

A guy like Frankie could get a guy in a real jam, not telling him nothing. An innocent guy all of a sudden in real trouble and not knowing what hit him. . . .

When he began to shiver, he got out as quickly as he could. One last look down the well. Yetta's shoes, both of them. Where was Myron? He moved quickly into the house. The alarm clock said it was ten minutes past one o'clock. He dropped the matches near Papa's tin box.

Yetta can stay out all kinds of hours and when she comes home she gets a big kiss for it. Me, I get killed with a strap.

He rolled himself into the blanket. Some day he'd have

a bedroom of his own. Like his sister. His own bed, too The bum the janitor hired to work the stove in the cellar slept on a cot too.

Papa's right. I'm a bum. Lenny, bum, Lenny, bum, that's all he knows. A lousy nobody in his own house. But who says this is my own house?

Beating up that Chink like that. He was a nice guy, nice smile. Those Chinks never bother anybody. No more, Frankie, we're finished. Joe was right. I never was a Panther. If I was, I'd get that Panther tattooed on my arm, wouldn't I? Nobody'd stop me. Papa'd beat me, but one lousy beating wouldn't have stopped me, not if I really wanted to belong.

No more Panthers. No more friends. This is the breakoff. Frankie, Joe, Shlemie, the Dorfmans, Lippy; they were his friends, rough and tough maybe, but warm inside, sticking up for each other. If that car driver on Pell Street had come out to get Joe Kusack, the whole gang would have jumped him. All for one, one for all, real pals.

Sure he'd been used tonight. They weren't putting anything over on Doc Kramer. In fact, deep inside him, hadn't he known the gang was looking for trouble when they didn't go to their accustomed Chinese restaurant? Surely he'd known when they'd worn their coats, when Joe had started dumping the ketchup into the sugar? Had there been any doubt in his mind when Frankie had ordered rye whiskey, Frankie who didn't like the stuff? Knowing, why hadn't he beat it?

Because, you didn't want to. You wanted to be part of the excitement. You wanted to be a Panther. . . .

But, he promised himself just before dozing off, no more jobs—never again, so help me God.

6.

A NEWSPAPER open before him, Papa sat at the kitchen table. Carefully wetting a finger with his tongue, he turned a page, clucked as he saw the black headline. Mama handed Yetta a dinner plate to dry. Lenny's sister got up on her toes to place the plate on the middle shelf. His eyes still on the newspaper, Papa fumbled for his metal box, picked out a butt, examined it, scowled, flung the butt back into the box. Almost reluctantly, he took out a whole cigarette, licked the end before lighting it.

"Two youths," he read, through a cloud of smoke, "rob, beat, woman." Indignation in his voice, he said, "Fourteen! Babies, ready for the electric chair. You see, Lenny, what happens?"

His face shiny from the hot June evening, Lenny nodded mechanically. Rocky Marciano, he read in the sports magazine, would defend his heavyweight crown in September. There'd be no television broadcast.

Papa said, "I talk to myself? Leonard!"

He raised his eyes. "Yeah, Papa?"

"You don't listen? You deaf?"

"I was reading."

"That is reading?"

"What should I read, the *Forward?*"

"With me don't get fresh."

He dropped the magazine. "I wasn't getting fresh. I just didn't hear what you said."

Carefully Papa killed the cigarette, examined the butt at arm's length, placed the half-cigarette into the box.

"You listen to me," he said. "Maybe your picture don't get in a paper so my friends see what a bum I got for a son."

Lenny blinked. "My picture? What paper?"

"It could happen if you don't listen." He read another headline. " 'Youth, sixteen, shoots bartender in stick-up.' You listen, Leonard? Bums, robbing, killing."

Mama said, "And the bums, they get killed too."

Papa applauded. "That is good. Every day, every minute, a bum should get killed. Then maybe respectable people, they can walk the street. You going some place?"

Lenny rolled his shirt sleeve above the elbow. "It's hot. I just wanna get some air."

"Oh, no, you don't," Yetta cried, gray eyes hot. "Every time Myron comes, you're not around. He doesn't even know I got a brother. Once, just once, wait and say hello."

"What's so important?"

"I just want Myron to recognize you at my wedding."

Papa looked grim. "With my son, an appointment you got to make."

Lenny walked to the door. "That's a good idea. I'll see Myron around."

"Where," Yetta snapped, "down at the Panther Club?"

Lenny stopped short. He couldn't lie out of this. Twice she'd seen him come out of the clubrooms. Yetta and her big toilet of a mouth.

Papa eyed him sharply. "I got needles for you, Leonard, my son."

"I'm just going for a walk. Honest, Papa."

He slapped the table so hard, the metal box jumped. "Stay!"

"For cryin' out loud!"

"One more word from your dirty mouth . . . !"

"What did I say? Huh? What?"

Mama touched his shoulders. Pleading, she said, "Be a good boy, Lennale. Sit down, talk to Papa."

Mama's words held no rebuke, yet he felt somehow defensive.

"All right, Papa, what should we talk about?"

Papa's chin quivered. "A big mouth you got, find something to talk about."

"You think the Yankees will take Cleveland this year?"

"Bum!" He fumbled with his belt. "From your Papa fun you make?"

"Mama!" Lenny cried. "You tell me. What should Papa and I talk about?"

Mama looked confused. "About what should a son and a Papa talk?"

Lenny held his hands to his head to still the throb. "We're going in a circle. Papa knows the Books; he can read the Bible backwards; he knows the Talmud. Lots of times I heard Papa argue with the men in the *shul*, people sitting around the stoop."

Proudly, Mama said, "Papa knows."

"Everything. Papa is a wise man, learned, a genius. But all my life he could never find something to talk to me about. All my life, all he could say to me was bum, *nogootnick*, tramp, *pascudnik*. All my life! Funny, ain't it?"

Papa got out of his chair, opened his belt buckle. "Gives the strap, Leonard, my son with the big mouth."

Unflinching gray eyes, chin up, he said, "That you also know good, Papa. The strap. When you don't know what else to do, what to say, you always have the strap."

Mama wrung her hands. "Never have I heard you talk so fresh to Papa."

Lenny shook his head. "I'm not trying to be fresh, Mama. I just want to say what's on my mind."

Yetta, tears in her eyes, said, "Please, Lenny, don't get Papa excited. Myron is coming."

Lenny ignored her. "At my Bar Mitzvah, Papa, you told me I'd become a man. Thirteen years old and I was all grown up. Ain't that a laugh? A man getting beat up with his father's belt."

Papa's hand faltered, came away from his belt. As if in self-defense, he said, "For nothing I don't hit." He pointed to the newspapers. "Me you don't disgrace. Better I kill you first. A strap is nothing. When I was a boy, my Papa, he should rest in peace, used his strap plenty. Harm it didn't do me. I listened, I learned. My picture in the papers I didn't get like those other bums."

Trying desperately to talk in a calm and even tone, knowing he was not succeeding, Lenny cried, "Why didn't your father try talking to you once in a while instead of hitting?"

Papa's eyes opened in amazement. "Talk to a thirteen-year-old *boychick?*"

"A thirteen-year-old man, remember?" Anger hurried his words. "I'm not thirteen any more. I'm sixteen. Yeh, don't look so surprised. Nobody around here pays attention to my birthdays but I was sixteen a week ago."

Papa played with his chin. "Next week, not last week. In the month of Tammuz."

"Not my Jewish birthday. June twenty-eighth in English, Papa."

Yetta said, "Gee, I forgot, Lenny. With Myron and all, I clean forgot. I'll buy you a nice sports shirt."

"Don't buy me nothing."

Papa said, "I buy him a good strap. A boy when he is thirteen, for his own sins he is responsible. No more his sins fall on his Mama and Papa. That is law. But thirteen or sixteen, a man maybe needs a bit in his big mouth so into a truck he don't run and get killed. You, my son, you need a big bit."

Lenny nodded fiercely. "All my life, Papa, I needed that bit, didn't I, Papa, a bit and a ring through my nose. Right, Papa?"

Yetta cried, "For goodness sake, Lenny, why do you have to flare up? Every time somebody talks to you, you got a chip on your shoulder."

Papa said, "In his head I push that chip. Wood in wood, it don't hurt him."

Lenny yanked open the door. "No use talking, you got it in for me, every one of you. I'm going for a walk. I'll be back."

"Early!"

"When I'm damn good and ready."

Lenny rushed out of the house, slamming the door so hard, the walls shook.

He walked around for a while, then, as he'd known he would do, went down to the club. A poker game was in progress on the table which had been moved to the wall. Joe Kusack, Cheesy Dorfman, Lippy Valentine, Shlemie Cohen and three new youngsters named Beans, Teddy and Smithy rounded out the hands. Sade was the only one watching the game. Standing behind Joe Kusack, she leaned against him, her arms around his neck.

Lippy threw a dime into the pot. "Come on, suckers."

Joe Kusack studied his cards. With his head, he pushed Sade away.

"What do you want me to do, eat it?"

"All right, all right," she said.

Joe Kusack picked up a dime, spun it, slapped it down. "Heads," he announced. "Okay, I see you. Me, you don't bluff. What you got?"

Lippy tossed his cards into the pile of discards. "I got nothin'."

"Aces." Raking in the pot with both hands, Joe chortled, "You got nothin' you can sleep with my girl."

Sade looked hurt. "Is that nice?"

Joe tried to explain, "He said he's got nothin'."

She swung her hip. "With me, he's liable to develop something."

"That cabbagehead? Put it on a plate."

Lenny walked across the floor to where Frankie was sitting with a girl he'd never seen before. Frankie was holding her hand, whispering in her ear. She sat stiffly, frightened. As Lenny approached, she looked up, a look of relief sweeping over her face at the interruption.

Frankie said, "Hi, Doc. Meet Dolly. She's new around here. Wants to be a Panther Deb. She get your vote?"

"Anytime," Lenny said, drawing out the word the way he knew Frankie did. "Hello, Dolly."

There were hollows around her eyes, blue eyes, clear and startlingly blue.

"Hi, Doc," Dolly said. Her lips trembled as she tried a smile. "Glad to meet you."

She had a wide forehead, a small button nose, lips that formed in quiet, sloping lines. And when she looked up

at Lenny, her eyes were direct and unafraid. He felt a warmness in his belly as he stared down at her.

Frankie said, "You think she'd make a good Deb?"

Lenny, about to nod, changed his mind. "I don't know," he said, suddenly angry. "I don't think so."

Hurt darkened her eyes. "I've got to be a Deb," she said fiercely.

Lenny looked away. "Why the hell do you have to be?"

Frankie said, "Dolly's Sade's friend. Moved into Sade's building couple weeks ago. Sade brought Dolly down here."

She snapped, "I asked her to. I wanted to join the Panthers."

"Okay," Lenny cried, waving his arms. "So go on and join. I ain't stopping you. What are you telling me this for, Frankie?"

Frankie was annoyed. "What you hollering about, Doc? I saved Dolly for you, special for you. I could have sicked Lippy onto her, or Shlemie, but I waited for you."

"Don't do me no favors."

"Doc, why don't you take Dolly in the back room and find out what kind of Deb she'd make? It's okay with you, Dolly?"

She got up and stood in the subdued light of the table lamp. From under her long lashes, she looked out at Lenny.

"I want to belong to the Panthers."

"Doc won't hurt you, will you, Doc?"

Lenny stuffed his hands into his trouser pockets. That hard suffocating feeling was back in his chest.

Frankie said, "Lippy'd hurt her, but not you, Doc."

She touched Lenny's arm, looked into his eyes. "You don't like me."

"It ain't that."

She looked so clean and sweet, not like the rest of them. She tried to be tough about the initiation that Sade had evidently explained to her, but her eyes were too bright, her nostrils quivering like a horse ready to turn and bolt.

Frankie put an arm around each of them. "C'mon, kids, in the back room."

Lenny moved stiffly, with his back straight. Once they were in the room, Frankie said something he didn't hear, then closed the door on them. They stood for a few moments looking at each other with the shy eyes of strangers. Lenny glanced down at the cot, against the wall, a dirty cot, its yellow soiled blanket rolled into a ball.

Lamely, Lenny said, "Maybe you wanna sit down or something. . . ." The words burst out of him. "What's a kid like you doing down here?"

"I'm fifteen!"

He tried to show contempt, failed. "Fifteen is a kid. What's so important you gotta join the Panthers?"

Dolly's lips quivered. "My friend Sade is a Panther."

"What's that gotta do with it?"

Abruptly, she sat down on the cot, looked down at her clasped hands. "You don't understand. It isn't easy making friends. Out in Philly, where we came from, I had a lot of friends. Here—on Delancey Street—well, there are a lot of people, thousands and thousands—" Her eyes came up to his. "But you can't stop them and say come be my friend. Until I met Sade, I was so lonesome I thought I'd die."

Lenny shrugged. "But why join the Panthers?"

Her words spoke themselves out of her insides. "Because I want to belong; I want friends, a lot of friends, because Sade belongs and I want to go where she goes, do what she does. Why do you belong?"

He shook his head. "It's different with a feller. Your mother wouldn't like it, if she found out."

"Ma?" Dolly laughed with her lips but there was no mirth in her eyes. "Ma wouldn't care. Every time Ma goes on a date with a feller she tells me why don't I find a nice boy friend."

"You got no old man?"

She looked wistful. "In Chicago. Pa got married again after his divorce from Ma. I got two half-brothers I've never seen. . . . I don't like the name Doc."

He was amused. "A name's a name. Call me Lenny. Look, honey." He stopped, surprised. The word honey had sounded so strange. "Dolly, why don't you go home?"

The smile was gone. "I told you why."

He shook his head angrily, ran a hand through his hair. Abruptly, he sat down on the cot, took her hand in his.

"Be my girl, Dolly."

She looked confused. "Is it all right?"

"Sure. Some of the guys have their own girl, like Joe and Sade." He could feel his heart pumping. "You're my girl."

"If that's what you want."

"That's just what I want."

Her eyes were dry and clear and radiant. "I like you, Lenny, I like you very much. I'd love to be your girl."

"Okay." He took a deep breath, squeezed her hand, laughed. "What the hell am I so nervous about? Look,

Dolly, when we go outside we'll act like nothing's happened."

"Nothing has."

"You don't understand. Act like something happened even though it didn't. Don't you get it?"

She looked frightened again. "They'll find out."

He took her arms. "No, they won't. You're my girl, remember? And what's mine, nobody touches." With his fingers he smeared some of her lipstick, rubbed a little on his mouth.

There was no coyness in her manner when she said, "You could make that for real."

He stared at her lips, looked into her eyes. "If that's what you want."

There was a sudden kind of radiance as she repeated his words. "That's just what I want."

He framed her face in his palms, pulled her close, gently pressed his lips against hers. Slowly her lips parted, her arms slipping around his neck, holding him tightly, her mouth wet, delicious. After a while, she pulled away and they sat looking at each other, panting with the effort, a look of excitement and contentment on their faces.

Wordlessly, he took her hand and they went outside. Frankie came up from the couch, his eyes searching, probing.

"She gonna make a good Deb, Doc?"

Lenny could feel her hand trembling in his. "Good enough," he said. "Good enough for me. For nobody else but me."

Frankie's lips curled. "Sure, Doc. That's okay with me. You know that. Now how about that Panther cockamamie?"

Unconsciously Lenny felt his arm where the tattoo would be placed.

"What's the hurry?" he said. "My old man ain't dead."

"I thought maybe you wanted to be a Panther—all the way."

"I'll think about it, Frankie."

Frankie laughed. "Sure, Doc."

Lenny watched him swagger to the poker game. Uneasiness stirred within him. Frankie, the wise guy, knew nothing had happened in that kitchen.

Later, Lenny took Dolly home. She lived on Ridge Street, above a retail store that sold monuments. On the stoop, he talked with her for a while; then, after deciding they'd meet again down the club the next night, he watched her go into the dimly lighted hallway. Returning to the club, he felt gay and lighthearted.

He had a girl, all his own, and it was so wonderful.

The same boys were still playing poker except that Frankie had taken Lippy's place. Lenny watched for a few minutes, then stretched out on the couch. Thinking of Dolly, how his lips had touched hers, how sweet and good it had tasted, he fell asleep.

Voices woke him. Lenny rubbed his eyes, pushed himself up on an elbow. Frankie was talking to somebody, a thin man wearing a hat and jacket. There was only one man, Lenny knew, who could go fully dressed in the heat of summer. Yuss Wacks. Instinctively, Lenny turned his head to look for Big Mac, Yuss's bodyguard. Lenny saw him standing near the door talking to Joe Kusack.

Except for them, the club was completely deserted.

Yuss stood rigidly, hands clasped behind him, his face

hidden in the shadows. "I'm paying the rent for this joint and I don't piss away money on kids."

"Okay, Yuss," Frankie said respectfully, "no more kid stuff."

"No more banging around Spiks."

"Talk to Joe, he starts it."

Joe Kusack laughed. "We been bustin' those Spiks good."

"Why, Joe?"

Joe Kusack shrugged. "It's kicks. You shoulda seen the Spik we cockalized. We took off his pants and he run balls naked through the streets. Girls hollerin' and everythin'. Blood runnin' outa his ears."

Yuss Wacks slapped his hands together. "That's what I been telling Frankie. Kid stuff! What does it get you?"

Frankie said, "The Spik insulted Sade so Joe called us and we came down to work him over."

Wacks said flatly, "Since when can anybody insult Sade?"

Joe Kusack said, "That supposed to mean somethin'?"

Wacks waved him down. "You talk but you say nothing. What do you prove when you beat the hell out of a Spik?"

Joe's head came up high. "We gotta show 'em we're better'n them any day in a week."

He shook his head. "So it takes a whole gang to prove it with one Spik. Get smart. You don't bother with 'em, they'll think they're nothing. Bang 'em, and they think you must be afraid of having them around, so they commence thinking they're somebody. I just don't want to see you kids jam yourselves up."

Frankie laughed. "We can't help you if we're in the clink."

"Yeah. But you're nice kids and I wouldn't want you in trouble. Another thing, those damn sport coats some of you got, those yellow and black things I wouldn't be found dead with."

"The Panther sports jacket?"

"Get rid of it. You run errands for me, you maybe gotta make a run for it and some cop spots the big letters and knows who you are. Kid stuff, them lettered jackets. Every guy who dumps 'em gets a ten-spot."

Frankie said hopefully, "Maybe we could just take the letters off."

Joe Kusack groaned. "What's the good of it without no letters?"

"Okay," Frankie sighed. "No jackets. Yuss, maybe I can talk to you, alone."

"You'll excuse us, Joe?"

"Sure, sure," Joe said, his feelings hurt. "What'sa matter, Frankie, I ain't your pal?"

Frankie drew Yuss toward the kitchen door, as he spoke over his shoulder to Joe, "I just wanna get the layout of our next job. Honest to God, Joe."

Partly mollified, Joe said, "Sure, sure."

Yuss stopped Frankie before he could push open the kitchen door. "All right, Frankie, let's have it. He can't hear you here."

Frankie looked around. Quickly Lenny shut his eyes. After a moment, his voice guarded, Frankie said, "When, Yuss, when do I get into your mob?"

Yuss gave a short laugh. "You're in a damn hurry."

"I can handle myself, Yuss. I'm tired of hanging around here. I wanna join a real crowd."

"Soon. Give it time. You're only a kid."

"I'm past seventeen. Big Mac is only twenty."

Yuss seemed amused. "That's three big years between you, and you know what? It's like thirty years. Chris', kid, Big Mac did a bit at Hawthorne and beat a homicide rap before he was nineteen. Aw, stop worrying, you'll make it. Only right now I need you here. Go on, take it, a extra ten bucks. . . . Is that the Kramer kid on the couch? How long is he gonna mooch around here?"

"He's my friend, Yuss."

"Sure," he said dryly. "That'll get you crabs. You can't get him to go on jobs, he's just excess baggage. Dump him. Let him go bother somebody else."

"I can't just heave him out."

Yuss's voice came from the direction of the street door. "He's gonna produce or get off the pot. As long as I pay the rent, the club will be run my way."

After a while, Lenny opened his eyes. Yuss and Big Mac were gone. Joe and Frankie sat mutely at the table. For some reason, they seemed to be brooding.

7.

That summer Lenny saw Dolly almost every day. A part-time job in Morty's fruit and vegetable market delivering bundles for weary shoppers earned him enough money to give Mama five dollars a week and still have seven or eight dollars for himself.

Once a week he took Dolly to the Apollo or the Delan-

cey or the Academy of Music on Fourteenth Street. Twice a week, on sunny days, they spent hours bathing in the Hamilton Fish Pool, a city-owned recreation center with diving, swimming and wading pools. In the evening they took long walks along the East River Drive, around Corlears Hook, up Clinton Street.

Holding hands, they walked for miles, stealing an occasional kiss, giggling as people stared. Not once did either one go down to the Panthers Club. The hell with 'em, Lenny told her. Who needs 'em? They can't kick me out. I quit.

Lenny could not remember ever being so happy in his life.

It was the day after Labor Day when excitement ran high in the Kramer house. Monday Lenny had returned to Seward Park High School as a junior. Thinking of school as he got up from the soft chair to get ready for bed, there was a sharp, staccato knock on the door. Mama and Papa exchanged puzzled glances. It was eleven-thirty and even in the summertime, it wasn't exactly the time for visitors.

"Come," Papa said, his head turning stiffly where he sat at the table reading his Hebrew book.

Two men, tall, one powerfully built, the other lanky, came into the house.

His eyes alert, Papa said, "Yes?"

The heavy man's voice was brisk, sharp. "I'm Detective Case, this is my partner, Detective Miller." His eyes shifted to Lenny. "You're Doc Kramer."

Lenny looked down at Papa, saw the accusation in his eyes. Guilty, he thought, whatever I didn't do, Papa's convicted me.

"I'm Lenny Kramer. What about it?"

"We want you down the station house for a couple questions."

Lenny stared in honest bewilderment. "You got the wrong guy."

Mama stumbled to her feet. "What is?" she cried. "My Leonard—what he done? Mr. Detective, what?"

Miller's smile was friendly. "Take it easy, Mom."

Case said sharply. "He was foolin' around with a girl."

Bewildered, Mama shook her head. "My son? A girl? Not my Lenny."

Case smiled thinly. "We got a complaint. A gang of boys worked over a Puerto Rican girl—"

Lenny shouted, "What Puerto Rican girl? I don't even know any."

"—up on the roof. Now we're not accusing your son but if he'll answer a couple questions down at the station house, maybe he can come home in an hour or so."

Papa jumped to his feet. "This girl, when it happened?"

"What time did Lenny get home tonight, Pop?"

With his fingertips he rubbed his forehead. "Eleven."

He turned to Lenny. "That right, kid?"

Uneasy tension grew under his skin. "Five after eleven."

Case nodded. "That's what I figured. Where were you say from eight tonight?"

Lenny didn't have to remember. He'd been with Dolly from seven-thirty to almost ten. But somehow he couldn't tell Mama and Papa about Dolly. . . .

"I was around."

Carelessly, Miller said, "Down the Panther Club, I guess."

Lenny nodded. "Yeah."

Papa cried, "With the rest of the bums."

Miller smiled. "Take it easy, Pop. Just a bunch of kids having fun, right, Lenny?"

The tension was gone, leaving a vague apprehension. "Sure, that's all. We kid around."

Case cried, "Then go out, grab a girl and line her up!"

"That's not so," Lenny protested.

Papa's voice quivered. "I knew it. My son, his picture in the papers. You come home, you was so quiet, I thought something was funny."

"Papa, what are you saying?"

Case said, "Come on, kid, we're wasting time. If you're innocent, you got nothing to worry about. The girl won't point you out if you wasn't there."

Papa moaned. "What I tell my friends? What, my dear son?"

"I had nothing to do with a Puerto Rican girl!" Lenny shouted.

Mama's hands shook. "My boy, he is good."

Case said, "They're all good—six feet under."

"The shame of it," Papa cried. "All my friends—the shame."

Case said, "Six Panthers out for a good time, on the arm. For cryin' out loud, why don't you go out and pay for it, 'stead of giving us a hard time." Case looked at Mama, the tears flowing down her gaunt face. "Now, let's have less weepin' and wailin' and get down to the station house."

Lenny said, "I didn't do it. I wasn't even with the guys tonight."

Miller shook his head. "A minute ago you were, now you weren't."

"You don't understand. I—"

"Maybe you're mixed up. You wanna get a jacket or something? It might get cool later."

"You guys don't wanna listen."

"Down the station house, I'll take out the ear plugs."

A jacket over his arm, Lenny began to follow the detectives out of the house. Mama embraced him, weeping against his chest.

Papa said bitterly, "I knew some day the police would come. The shame!"

In an anteroom on the second floor of the seventh precinct, they questioned Lenny again, Case rough and tough, Miller gentle, sympathetic. Lenny told them about Dolly, how he couldn't say anything about her because his parents didn't know he had a girl and he preferred they did not know, yet. He'd left Dolly just before ten o'clock.

Miller said, "Sure, kid, we understand."

"He's lyin'!" Case cried. "Then what'd you do between ten and eleven when you got home? You better open up or I'll do it for you, the hard way, through the top of your head."

Miller said kindly, "Don't hit him, Case. He'll tell the truth. You met some of the boys after you left your girl?"

"No, no. I didn't see the gang tonight. Honest to God. Ask them. I went for a walk on the Williamsburg Bridge, up and back, then when I got tired, I went home."

Case growled. "Lemme work him over with the hose."

Pleading burned in Miller's eyes. "I won't let him, kid, if you tell the truth."

Nostrils flaring with an angry, fighting fear, Lenny jumped out of his seat. "I'm telling the truth. He can't hit me."

"I'll try to hold him back," Miller said. "But my partner's got a lousy temper. Where'd you go after you left your girl?"

Lenny sat down again, cold and shaken. "On the bridge . . ."

Case cried, "Lemme bust him once, then he'll open up. The girl was raped around ten-fifteen. Plenty of time for you to meet the gang, get in your two bucks' worth and go home. I got a hunk of hose that'll just hit the right spot to make him talk."

"That hose?" Miller said. "One sock and you'll bust his head wide open. He'd bleed to death like a pig. Give him a chance to talk, you gotta give him one more chance."

For a second, suspicion flared in Lenny's mind. Case was too angry, Miller too friendly; then he saw the tear in Miller's earnest eyes and the suspicion was gone.

"What's he wanna hit me for? I tell you I didn't do anything. Ask the girl. That should settle it."

Case said, "She's too sick tonight. Tomorrow we'll have her down here. Meanwhile you make it easy on yourself."

Miller said, "You're a nice kid. We don't care about you. Just tell us the story, who was with you, and you can walk right out of here."

"I wasn't there, I tell you. You got to believe me."

Case exploded, storming around the room. "Where's that hose? I'll rip him wide open, till his guts hang out on the floor. Where'd I put it?"

Lenny remembered the stories he'd heard of how the police filled a rubber hose with sand before administering beatings. Then the sand was dumped out and the hose placed innocently near the sink faucet. The combination of fear and anger made him nauseous.

"Give him another chance," Miller begged.

"I got it!" Case shouted triumphantly. "Okay, talk."

His eyes on the hose, Lenny said, "I didn't, so help me God, I wasn't even near the gang."

Case slapped the desk hard with the twelve-inch length of black hose. "Lemme give it to him."

Miller's voice shook. "Talk, Lenny, before it's too late."

"Honest to God, it's the truth."

Miller shrugged, lifted his shoulders in a gesture of defeat. He tried once more, the last shred of diplomacy gone.

"You dumb bastard, we give you a chance to beat the rap and you don't take it. Talk!"

Now the detectives' plan was obvious. Case fighting him with rough talk and dire threats, Miller actually exaggerating those threats with his worried look and earnest pleading, threats that were never intended to be executed.

Lenny's voice was stronger now. "I told you the truth. I swear it."

Miller touched his shoulder. "C'mon, we'll take a walk downstairs. One of your friends will talk and he'll save his hide while you take the full rap."

Case leading, Miller to his rear, Lenny went through the main detectives' room. He saw Frankie, a sullen look on his handsome face, sitting at a desk with a detective. In quick succession, he caught glimpses of Joe Kusack, Shlemie, Cheesy Dorfman and Lippy Valentine. He was going down the stairs when he saw Artie Dorfman ahead of him. Six of the gang. He was the seventh. One was innocent. The detectives knew that.

Near the sergeant's desk, but over to one side, Lenny saw people standing around. At first they were just a

blur of indistinct shapes. Then he recognized Mrs. Davis, thin and gaunt as her son. Shlemie's father, a big, robust man. Lippy Valentine's mother, face yellow, oily from the summer heat. Papa! Papa had come. Mama? He looked quickly around. The Dorfmans' mother and father, raggedly dressed elderly people. Joe Kusack had no family. Mama was not here. Somehow, Lenny was glad.

The lieutenant, a red-faced man with cool blue eyes came out of the room, sat down at the sergeant's desk. He spoke slowly, carefully, his blank face showing nothing of what he thought or felt.

"These boys, your sons, will stay here overnight. We have cells in the back room. They'll be comfortable enough."

A tall, slender man, whom Lenny had not noticed before, stepped forward.

"Lieutenant, if you will fix bail, I can arrange bond."

The boys looked at each other. Frankie whispered, "I knew Yuss'd send his mouthpiece."

The lieutenant said, "Mr. Caldron, these boys are being charged with a felony; I can't fix bail. You know that, counsellor."

"Could I suggest, Lieutenant, that you send them to the Youth House?"

In a voice as coldly assumed as his face, the lieutenant said, "Mr. Caldron, we've got enough juvenile delinquents in the Youth House without adding these older boys, even if Youth House would accept them."

"They are only youthful offenders."

A muscle twitched in the lieutenant's face. "Legally, yes. But as far as I'm concerned they've been a thorn in the side of this precinct for many years. The court will

probably give them youthful-offender treatment, but if I were the court—" He pressed his lips together for a few seconds. "But I'm not. Anyway, up until the court decides their case, they will be given the same treatment as any other felons." He turned to a detective. "Get their prints, then book them. Eight o'clock tomorrow morning they will be taken to Headquarters. I want them to go through the line-up. I'd like other cops to get a good look at them. After they're photographed, they will be driven, by one of our finest wagons, to Felony Court for arraignment. The Magistrate will then run the show."

In the cells in the back of the precinct, the disinfectant hung heavy in the air, burning the nostrils, bringing tears to the eyes. Lenny didn't sleep that night, pacing the stone floor. Two steps, and the toilet pot was in the way, turn left, one step and the bunkers were there. That was all, an upper and lower bunker, a toilet bowl, four walls and a barred door. He walked around, as he'd seen the tiger do in the cage in Central Park. Or a Panther, a Delancey Panther.

The police had placed the Dorfman boys in one cell, Shlemie and Lippy in an adjoining one. Frankie and Joe were in the cell opposite him and occasionally they yelled across, loud, jocular obscenities that brought hearty laughs from the drunk in Lenny's cell. A crying kind of a drunk who liked to throw off his clothes and parade around, pointing, leering. After Lenny ignored him for a while, the drunk crawled into the lower berth and slept.

Tired, Lenny climbed up to his bed, lay there looking up at the gray ceiling. He grew cold and wrapped the

coarse army blanket around his body. Abruptly burying his face in the hard mattress, he sobbed convulsively.

8.

In the Youth Term Part of Felony Court, the boys were lined up before the bench, Detectives Case and Miller, gold badges pinned to their jacket lapels, flanking them on either side. The room was crowded with defendants, witnesses and police, waiting their turn to go before the court. Judge Pelham, a heavy-set man with graying hair, looked pale in the black robes. He fingered through some papers, read the yellow-colored complaint sheet, frowned.

"The complaint has not been signed."

Detective Case cleared his throat. "Your Honor, sometime during the night or early morning, the complaining witness and her family moved from the neighborhood. We are making every effort to locate them so that the girl can sign the complaint."

Judge Pelham looked unhappy. "I don't like keeping these boys in prison for a longer time than is necessary. After all, they are just youths."

The detectives exchanged glances. Miller said, "Your Honor, the boys have given our precinct a lot of trouble—"

The Judge said, "I see by their yellow sheets there are no previous convictions or arrests."

The assistant district attorney, a snub-nose Irishman with heavy-framed glasses said, "Five hundred dollars bail should be sufficient, Your Honor."

The Judge nodded, wrote on the back of the complaint. "Five hundred dollars. I will adjourn arraignment for two days. This should give the police department sufficient time to find the complainant and ascertain if she wishes to prosecute." He looked around the courtroom. "Meanwhile, these defendants should have counsel to represent them. Where are the parents of these boys?"

People moved from the courtroom aisles, converged behind the defendants.

Caldron, the dapper lawyer who had spoken for them in the precinct, moved forward, his fingers resting lightly on the mahogany table. "Your Honor, I represent these defendants."

"No!" Papa glared at him. "I don't hire him. I am Mr. Kramer, Judge. Him I don't need."

Judge Pelham frowned. "You don't want this counsellor to represent your son, Mr. Kramer? Then you will obtain other counsel? If you can't afford a lawyer the court will assign legal aid."

Papa shook his head. "He don't need lawyers. My dear son, he needs a strap. I don't give him no lawyer. Money, I ain't got to throw away. I am a poor man."

Judge Pelham looked disturbed. "You are his father, Mr. Kramer, and should do everything in your power to help your son. Be that as it may, I will assign legal aid." He held up his hand. "Your son is entitled to legal counsel, regardless of what you think, Mr. Kramer, and I will see that he gets his rights." About to turn away, he thought of something. "Mr. Kramer, if he were my son, I'd do everything in my power to see that he does not spend another night behind bars."

The counsellor spoke up. "Your Honor, I have a bondsman ready to bail out these defendants."

Papa shook his head violently. "No. My son you don't bail."

The counsellor said, "Just twenty-five dollars—"

"Not twenty-five cents."

"I could get somebody to lend you the money—"

"This is the last chance for him." Papa's voice trembled. "If prison don't help, we are lost. Think about that, Leonard, my son. Think every day, every night."

Lenny cried, "Please, Papa, get me out. I had nothing to do with this, so help me God. Don't let them put me in prison. Papa!"

Judge Pelham stared at Papa, shook his head sadly. "If that is your wish, Mr. Kramer—but I feel you are making a mistake."

Papa's head bowed. "I try to talk to him, it don't help. What he likes, he does. I hit him, it's like hitting a wall. He's got bad in him, a lot of bad. Maybe a while in prison will do what his Papa could not." His voice became soft and gentle, as if he were saying a prayer. "Maybe—if God should help—this is the best way."

During the recreation period, Lenny tried to concentrate on the game of checkers he was playing with a redheaded youth, but his mind wandered back to the courtroom, to the judge, to Papa. . . . How could you do this to me, Papa!

The redheaded youth said, "You gonna start cryin' again? What the hell, you're sure a kid."

Lenny blinked away a tear. "Who's cryin'? I just got something in my eye."

The youth was skeptical. "Yeah? You Panthers think you're somebody. Delancey Street Panthers! Kids. We got a mob on a Hundred-Fourth Street that can take anybody. We don't play around with kid stuff. We do real jobs, heists and stuff. We got two cannons we took from cops. None of this zip-gun crap. Remember last year Pelly Seidler got life for knocking off a cop? He's from our mob. Remember Bella Murray and Jimmy DeMarco? They got ten t' twenty for stickin' up hotels and makin' a clerk spit blood. My mob. We're sure goin' places. You wanna join up with a real mob? When you get outta here, you come up and see me or my pal, Zanie Williams. Tell him—"

Lenny pushed himself away from the table. "I got a headache, Red. We can finish the game later." Lenny paced the marble floor, and when he was tired, found a bench where two boys were sitting.

One, a short, thin-faced boy who looked a lot younger than his sixteen years, said to his friend, "So what's that? Big deal. I done two raps for j.d. and now I got me y.o. treatment."

The other, an older-looking boy, said, "J.d. don't mean nothing. Lotsa kids in my gang done time before they was sixteen. But I'll bet y' a million dollars nobody gets y.o. treatment t'ree times. Guys don't get it more'n once. Look up the law, you'll see. Me, I got it twice. Maybe now a third time."

"You ain't got it yet—"

Lenny moved away, walked the floor, depressed. *Papa, help me! Somebody help me. Mama!*

He slept fitfully that night, awaking as dawn broke through the barred windows. He lay there, dry eyes staring up at the ceiling, and the hours passed slowly in dull

aching loneliness. When he heard the other youths stirring in their beds, he got up and dressed himself. Panels of sunlight slanted through the window as they prepared for breakfast.

The redheaded boy gave him a big wink. "This is the life. Three meals a day."

"Yeah," Lenny said, surprised his voice was so calm. "This is the way to live. One more day and maybe I'll be out. I can take it." He felt stronger, more confident as he bragged. "Hell, I can do it standing on my head."

Judge Pelham's eyes were sharp beneath his bunched brows as he listened to the counsellor for the defendants.

"Your Honor," Caldron said, "these youths were unjustifiably arrested. There was no identification by the complainant. After being forced to undergo mental and physical ordeals, fingerprinting, pictures, parading in a common line-up, these youths were kept one night in a dirty police cell and in the case of one other whom I do not represent, two more nights in the City Prison. Your Honor, this is a pretty high-handed business by our New York's finest. The police knew there was no prima facie case. I'm beginning to wonder if there really is any kind of a case. Is there a complainant? I charge the police department—"

"Counsellor," the Judge interrupted, "you made your point. Detective Case, have you traced the complainant?"

The seven youths turned their heads as one.

Detective Case was very sad. "No, Your Honor. We have tried with no success."

The counsellor said, "Your Honor, I move that the case be dismissed and the defendants discharged."

Judge Pelham began to write on the back of the yellow complaint. "Complainant failing to appear, defendants discharged."

The parents of the boys milled around them until the court attendant, ordered by the judge to clear the corridor, ushered them up the long aisle, out the door. As Lenny followed them out to the hallway, Papa, huffing and puffing, came out of an elevator. When he saw the crowd, his eyes lit up.

"What is?"

"They threw the case out," Shlemie's sister said. "I knew all the time the kids was innocent. A girl goes to make herself a couple bucks and she don't get paid, she hollers rape. I know the kind, believe me."

Papa turned to Lenny. There was an apologetic smile on his face. "I'm glad, my son. Right is right, always."

Lenny moved away. "Leave me alone."

"I didn't feel good, Lenny. For two days, I was sick."

"So was I," Lenny said bitterly, "in that lousy prison you put me in. Yes, you put me in there. If it was up to you, I'd die in prison."

"Lenny, no, listen to Papa—"

"I don't want to listen to you no more!" Lenny rushed past him to the exit door, ran down fifteen flights of stairs to the street.

The pale sun was warm on his back as he stepped out on the sidewalk and took a deep breath. It felt good, clean. Yuss Wacks called to him from the car parked at the coin meter.

"Come on kid, I'll give you a ride."

"I'm not crippled. I walk good," he shouted so loudly people stopped to look.

Yussel Wacks' lips tightened. "Take it easy, Doc. I'm your friend."

"Friend, my eye."

"Who got you counsel? Who tried to spring you? And I woulda got you out if your old man hadn't stopped the bondsman. I'm the guy who didn't want you doing time in that crummy prison."

Lenny said sincerely, "Thanks, Yuss, thanks a lot. Maybe you are my friend, maybe you're not. All I know is you did try to help me. While my old man wanted me to rot in a prison. . . . I'll bet he'd sing if the judge gave me ten years." His head came up high. "You still want to give me a lift?"

"Sure, get in. We'll wait for Polack. The other fellers got their folks with 'em. I don't wanna start anything."

After a while the others came out on the sidewalk, talking loudly, happily. Joe Kusack came directly to the car.

"Where was you, Doc? We looked for you. Hi, Yuss. Hi, Mac."

Big Mac, at the wheel, grunted something that made his beard twitch.

Joe said, "A bum rap. We beat the bum rap."

Lenny didn't see Papa until he spoke. "Lenny, come home with me. With bums you got no business."

"I'm riding, Papa."

"Lenny! Come!"

Lenny smiled thinly, "And if I don't, what'll you do, hit me?"

"Lenny, in a nice way—come home with me."

Lenny laughed. "What the hell's so special at home? Damn cot . . . the bum who makes steam in the cellar, he's got a cot too."

"You don't know what you say. Lenny, I want you home, now."

"When I'm ready, I'll come home."

Papa's voice shook. "Now, or you don't have to come home—never."

Lenny stared, blinked. "That's okay by me."

"For the last time . . ."

He turned to Joe, shouting, "You got room for me in your flat?"

Joe smiled. "I need company. It's kind of lonesome."

"You're my pal, Joe."

"You betcha sweet ass."

"You hear, Papa?"

Papa's voice was tight, his words thin and sharp. "Listen to me, Leonard. I am Papa. I am not a pal. I am Papa. You are my blood, my flesh and bones. Listen—"

"All my life I listened!" he cried. "And I didn't learn a damn thing. So long, Papa. See you around."

Papa's jaw fell. "You are one of them now."

"Yes, I am one of them."

Papa looked at Lenny with the impersonal eyes of a stranger. "I got no more son."

"No more whipping boy."

"Tomorrow I say *Kaddish* for my dead son. . . ." Papa began to rock, closing his eyes. "May God remember the soul of my honored son who is gone to his repose . . ."

"Drive!" Lenny cried, a sob in his voice. "For God's sake, Mac, get me out of here."

As the car pulled away from the curb, Joe Kusack sang,

"No more school, no more books.
Hang the teachers on the hooks."

9.

A BLOCK away a man was crying. It was hard listening to a man sob like that. What could have happened to make a man sound as if his heart were broken?

Lenny stirred uneasily, and sat up so abruptly he felt lightheaded. Somebody was shaking him.

"What's a mat', amigo? You cry, you sleep, you sleep, you cry."

Lenny rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, looked up at the man shaking him by the shoulders. The man grinned and became Juan Rivera. Then everything else came into focus, the flat, the hunger in his belly, the men waiting in the bridge shadows to kill them.

He said, "A dream, a lousy dream. What time is it?"

"Six 'clock, Sat'day morning."

Lenny swung his feet to the floor, went to the table for a cigarette. He found one, lighted it and walked hopefully to the window, looking out from behind a shade.

Maybe, he prayed, God, maybe they gave up.

The street was wet and desolate. He looked for a long time and just when he was about to yell with jubilation, he saw the two figures come out of the underpass and look up in his direction.

Bitterly, he said, "Big Mac never gives up."

Juan said, "Juan sick, belly hurt real bad."

Lenny cried, "Not even one day and look at us. How much more can we take? Juan, I'm taking a look up on the roof. Maybe—" He lifted his head to the ceiling.

"Maybe God is in our corner. Keep the door locked until you hear me call."

Juan's eyes looked glassy. "Juan take a fix, then go too."

"No! If the roof is deserted, I'll come back. Go take your fix before you get an attack."

Lenny opened the door slowly, glanced up the hall, listened with bated breath. Quickly, he stepped out, waited a second until Juan closed the door. Even as he tiptoed to the stairway, Lenny heard the bolt close with a sound he was sure must have been heard throughout the building. Sucking air, he went up the two flights of stairs.

He stopped for a few seconds, listened. Somewhere a baby was crying, a million miles away or on the next floor, he couldn't tell. A dog barked, the bark turning into a whiny silence when a man swore. On hands and knees, Lenny went up the last seven steps to the roof. The door, which could be latched only from the inside, was partly open, the gray dawn a pencil stripe between door and jamb. Stretching out flat on the stairs, he cocked his ear in the direction of the open door. All he could hear was his heart pounding, the raspy sound in his throat as his breath came up in spurts.

He placed his fingers against the bottom of the heavy metal door, pushed wide and in one quick motion came to his feet ready to bolt. Dead quiet. No warning voices, no feet scraping on the gravel tar roof. Flattening himself against the sloping wall, he looked out as far as he could see. Nothing but gray sky and a wet, dripping chimney, a deserted roof, other roofs sprawling way, way out.

Nothing was alive on the roof.

Hoping, praying, he stepped out, the gravel crunching

under his foot. He brought out the other leg, stood there, all his senses alert. A pigeon, inadvertently left out for the night, or possibly returning from a pilgrimage, swooped down toward the roof. About to land on the steel girder, it suddenly shied away, with a noisy flapping of wings. Lenny dropped to his knees, looked under the empty water tank, saw the shiny black shoes and the tan brogues. Even as he came erect, a man came from around the tank, an ugly black revolver in his hands.

Shlemie, Lenny cried to himself, my friend Shlemie. A terrifying sense of disaster caught him as the gun came up, jerked. The sound was dull, a whine, and then a ping as the bullet slapped into the metal door behind him. Lenny turned, dived through the opening, landed with a dull thud, rolled, the hard steps hurting, cutting into his back and sides. When he reached the bottom step, he pushed himself up and ran on uncertain legs, not stopping until he reached the apartment, banging the door in a frenzy.

"Me, Doc, me, open up!"

Joe Kusack opened the door, watched him slide through, closed it quickly, slammed home the bolt. Lenny leaned against the door. He could feel his muscles jumping, and his stomach had pulled up into a tight sickening knot.

Joe Kusack growled, "Why the hell didn't y' tell me you was goin'? Not for the Spik tippin' me off, I'd a never opened the door. Well, what's the score?"

Lenny laughed quickly to hide his disappointment. "They got the roof covered, Shlemie and somebody else. Maybe more on the other roofs. Shlemie Cohen, our

friend. Never handled a rod in his life. All of a sudden he's got one—with a silencer yet!"

"Don't do it again!" Joe cried. "You hear me? They coulda followed you and got us all." His eyes rolled. "Chris', they could a knocked me off in bed."

Juan came out of the toilet. He looked pale, his arms crossed over his belly. "Juan got pain," he said. "Plenty pain." He began to moan. "Juan got bad cramps."

Lenny knew the symptoms; belly aches, diarrhea, the watery eyes and running nose.

"For cryin' out loud, didn't you take a fix yet?"

Juan's face began to twitch. "Juan got three left—"

Joe Kusack looked disgusted. "Goddam cokie. He'll get us in a jam, sure as hell."

There was no mirth in Lenny's smile. "What the hell you think we're in now?"

"We can hold out—but once his three shots is used up . . ."

Juan scratched his chest through his shirt until the cloth ripped open, exposing his naked chest. His face screwed up in anguish, he dug his nails into his hairy body. The skin broke. Red spots jumped into view, merging into a thin red line that ran down to his trousers.

"Cut it out," Lenny cried, slapping at Juan's hands. "You got three fixes. What's the sense of saving 'em when you're liable to cave in on us?" He pushed him toward the toilet. "Go on. I'll get you a spoon. Joe, we got a spoon someplace?"

Joe Kusack grunted. "Rusty as hell, in the kitchen."

Lenny hurried into the kitchen. In the corner of a cabinet drawer, he found two spoons and two forks. He picked out the spoon with just a trace of rust and tarnish, bent

the handle to a right angle. Juan could shake the white powder from the cellophane envelope into the spoon. A few drops of water, a lighted match held under the spoon, and the heroin would dissolve so that the hypodermic syringe could suck the mixture into the glass tube. Then Juan could find a vein in his arm. . . .

When Lenny returned to the living room, Juan wasn't around. "In the crapper," Joe said, waving his arm in disgust. "He throwin' up his guts. You'll have to give him his shot."

"I'm not a doctor. I never gave somebody a shot. I watched, but—"

Lips twisted, Joe said, "He can't give it t'himself, that's sure. He'd rip his arm and bleed t' death."

Lenny heard the moan of anguish. Quickly he picked up a pack of matches from the table and hurried to Juan.

Juan came out of the toilet. His eyes were bright and there was a contented smile on his face. He saw them staring at the blood running down from where Lenny had dug the needle into the left arm, just below the elbow. Contemptuously, he wiped the blood with his right hand, dried the hand on his trousers.

Lenny showed Joe part of a syringe. "I bust the damn thing."

With rebellious satisfaction, Joe cried, "Good for him! Let him learn to get the monkey off his back." He stared, blinked. "What happens next time he needs a fix?"

PART TWO

Juan

I.

It was Saturday evening, hot, sticky, uncomfortable. A cigarette dangling limply from between thick lips, his back against the wall, Juan squatted on the blanket. Gray smoke wisps moved upward between his dark, smoldering eyes. Sleepily he watched Joe Kusack, the big one they called Polack, pace the room like an animal, impatient one moment, snarling the next. Juan's sideburns, which ran down almost to the jawline, jumped as he gave a quick grin.

Loco, the big Polack was a crazy Americano.

Lenny Kramer, the one they called Doc, came away from the window, into his view. Another Americano. But this one was not crazy. Frightened, yes, but smart in the head, *mucho* smart.

He took a last puff on his cigarette, crushed it against the wall, letting the butt drop to the floor. How many cigarettes did he have left? Ten? Eight? Without cigarettes one could manage. But without that white powder,

one could become more *loco* than the big Polack. *Muy loco.*

He thought of the men outside waiting to shoot them down. Americano dogs! One didn't mind dying if he could take a few of them with him. Perhaps the devil would be satisfied with just one Americano.

He wished he were back in Puerto Rico, in the Fanguito, the swarming slum area full of battered shacks on the outskirts of San Juan. From there the Rivera family had come to America barely two years ago. San Juan, the most beautiful place in the world, where one was at peace with himself, where one could run through the countryside, soft green carpets full of *hibisco* and blossoms of *tulipaneros* and big red *flores de la Pascua,* running, walking, playing, at peace with everyone, unafraid.

Not like in America where one had to slink along the shadows, frightened and alone, trembling every time two or more Americano youths came toward you. *Brutos!*

Once, four of them had come out of the dark hallways, swarming over him, knocking him to the ground. They'd taken off his clothing in the middle of the muddy gutter, they'd spit on his naked body, and beat him with their fists and feet, then they'd laughed as he stumbled up the street, dying from the shame of it.

Physical beatings weren't as bad as the taunts, the foul-mouthed remarks that ripped one's soul to pieces. Like the time he'd walked along Delancey Street with his Nancy.

Thinking of her brought back the old ache. Beautiful, golden-haired Nancy. I love you, *querida mía.*

The gang had stood along the curb, the one they called Frankie and his Delancey Dogs. Their words had dug into Juan like hot needles.

"How y'like Spik meat, Frankie?"

"Hey, Spik, fix us up."

"I sure got a hard-on for that blonde."

"Hey, Blondie, how about a white one for a change?"

Hot words on his lips, his muscles tense under Nancy's hand, he had wanted to turn and beat their dirty Americano faces. *Caramba*, how he had wished he had one of the machetes his father swung in the sugar fields. Like overripe cane, he would have sliced off their heads and laughed as the blood ran down the gutter.

But Nancy had squeezed his arm, smiled up at him, and it was as if they were not there.

Nancy, where are you now? Are you married? Do you have children? Nancy, *muy querida*, you belonged to Juan but they took you away; Frankie and the big dog of a Polack and the gang. . . .

He'd been walking with Nancy up Suffolk Street, this warm summer evening. Next week he'd go back to the American Vocational School where he was learning carpentry so that some day he could go back to Puerto Rico and help build houses.

Nancy's hand was warmly moist in his, her black handbag hanging freely by the long black strap on the other shoulder. The boy came out of nowhere. Juan didn't see him. Nancy cried out and the boy, thirteen, perhaps fourteen, was scooting up the street, Nancy's handbag in his fists, the torn strap dragging the floor.

Naturally, Juan gave chase. What else did one do? To suspect this was a trap of some kind never entered his mind. The boy darted into a building near the corner, Juan after him. For a few seconds Juan lost him in the hallway. Then the boy called down from a floor above.

"You lousy Spik!"

Unsuspicious, Juan went after him, up to the roof, and no sooner did he step out onto the tar and gravel, they pounced on him from behind. He recognized no one, heard nothing but the grunts and their hot panting as they rained blows on him, knocking him down, then kicking him into a soft, black pit.

When he awoke his body hurt with a pain that was agony. He heard laughter, high-pitched, a drunken kind of babble, and above the sounds, Nancy's terror-stricken voice pleading, her hoarse broken scream abruptly cut short.

Dios! Por favor!

A voice that sounded vaguely familiar said, "That's using the head. Free Spik meat. We figgered she'd follow him up here. Dumb broad!"

Juan's stomach heaved and turned. Dirty dogs! The whole thing planned; the boy acting as the lure, Juan, in turn, the lure for Nancy. Wondering what had happened, fearing for his safety, she'd fearlessly gone after him.

Fighting the nausea, he got to his knees, crawled toward the sound of the voices, and somebody cried out and again they piled into him, kicking him back into the darkness.

He was on his back when he opened his eyes. Two uniformed policemen stood over him. From a distance came a man's brisk voice asking questions, and Nancy's voice trembling, uncertain.

Somebody said, "She says six guys pulled a train on her."

"What'd she do, count them? Just an old-fashioned line-up."

Juan sat up. The roof chimney dipped, straightened. A

policeman bent over at the waist, shot questions at him. As best he could, he told what had happened from the time the boy had snatched the purse. Another policeman came over, listened for a moment.

"You could pick them out?"

Juan shook his head. "No, señor. The night, it was so dark. But it was them. On my life Juan swear it. Panthers, Delancey Panthers. The big one, Polack . . ."

"You couldn't see them, you said, not well enough to identify them."

"*Sí*, but Juan know."

"Okay, okay. Maybe the girl could put the finger on 'em."

The policemen's eyes looked enormous in the semidarkness, their badges big pieces of glistening tin reflecting the moonlight. A man in civilian clothes came over, Nancy at his side.

"Nancy?" Juan swallowed the lump in his throat, "They hurt you?"

Sobbing, she looked away and now he could see her dress ripped into shreds, which she held tightly against her body. *Brutos!* Americano dogs!

The plainclothesman said, "Those Panthers, no-good kids running around looking for trouble. She says she can pick out the six of them. The only names she knows was Frankie, Polack and Lippy. The others she knows by sight. This Frankie led the revue. This Polack didn't touch her. He just stood there egging the others on. Polack just sweated and he had a crazy look in his eyes."

A policeman said, "Doctors got a name for a guy like that. We'll take 'em down to the station house."

"She should go to a hospital."

"No," Nancy cried, "I go home."

Juan saw the tears, the anguish in her face, the shame, and his heart ached. On his life he swore he'd kill every one of the dirty dogs.

The plainclothesman said, "All right. We've got your name and address. We'll pick up the gang and in the morning you can identify them. You should see a doctor. . . ."

Juan took her home. Wordlessly, they walked. She didn't look at him, nor did he attempt to take her arm. People stared at her torn dress, her bruised, swollen face, where they'd hit her. Juan stared straight ahead. He wanted to put his arm around her, tell her it didn't matter, that he loved her.

Te quiero mucho, mi querida. I love you very much, my darling.

But he couldn't say the words . . . and suddenly, as strongly as he loved her, he hated her and he wanted to beat her for what had happened. It had been all her fault. Why had she been so stupid as to follow him up to the roof? Now every day for the rest of his life, whenever he'd see her, he would remember his fear, his helplessness against the Americanos. He wished that during the night, the devil would come take her away and there would be nothing to remind him of this black night.

A sob escaped his lips. I love you, *querida mía* . . . .

When they reached her building, he stood there while she went upstairs alone, never looking back. He never saw her again. In the morning when he came to tell Nancy of his great love for her, she was gone. Sometime during the night or early morning hours the family had disappeared as if, his wish granted, the devil had swallowed them up.

On his knees, in Nancy's empty apartment, he swore by

everything he held holy that some day he would kill Frankie, the leader of the Panthers.

2.

Meeting Manny Cole was the turning point in Juan's life.

It was just two weeks later, a warm September evening. For the fourth time in two weeks Juan and Frankie Davis were fighting, and for the fourth time Frankie's bony fists were cutting Juan's face to bloody ribbons. Four members of the Panthers stood in the circle of light made by the corner lamppost while Frankie, tall and thin, moved gracefully around the stockier Puerto Rican, stabbing with his left hand, pumping with his right.

Cars whizzed by on the Drive. Heads came out for a look, a smile, and disappeared. People idled over, mopped their brows, watched in a disinterested manner.

Juan shook off the punches, walked in for more, and suddenly there was a big opening. Frankie had grown too confident. Juan's fists exploded. Frankie went down, and as if this were a signal, the four Panthers moved in on him. The one they called Shlemie dived, hit him in a football tackle, bowled him over. Before he could get up, the ones they called Lippy and the Polack and Cheesy began to kick him unconscious.

Abruptly the beating stopped. He lay there, breathing heavily, a terrible pain in his ribs.

He heard Frankie say, "What's it to you, mister? You know the Spik?"

"No," a man said. "I don't know him. What's the matter, blondie? This kid so good, you hadda call for help?"

The man's voice was strong, full of authority, as if he were a giant with a detective badge. Juan lifted himself to a sitting position. The five Panthers surrounded a short, thin man dressed in gray slacks and full-sleeved white sport shirt. Lippy and Polack held open switchblade knives pointed at the man's chest. Shlemie and Cheesy stood hands on hips, chewing gum.

Frankie, a black smear under his nose giving him a fierce, menacing look, said, "I didn't tell you guys to lay off? The Spik and me could've settled this like always. After I K.O.'d him, then you could've worked him over."

Shlemie said, "He had y' down, Frankie, and no Spik is gonna shoot his mouth off how he beat a white man."

The thin man said contemptuously, "Even if it takes five of you guys to prove it. Five strong kids against one Puerto Rican and now you need two knives to keep me under wraps."

Frankie rolled his shoulders. "You're askin' for it, mister."

The man didn't seem frightened. "There's a cop coming and he's got a big club."

They took a backward step, their gaze skipping up and down the street. Frankie said, "One lousy cop don't scare us."

"How about that lousy club?"

"He can stick it. Cheese it!"

Abruptly, they broke ranks, scattered into long silhouettes walking quickly down the street.

The man stood over Juan. "Gee, you're a mess." Now

he had a handkerchief in his hand which he dabbed at Juan's cheekbones. "You're bleeding like a pig."

Juan pushed his hand away. "You I no need, Americano." He got up, stood straddle-legged, trying desperately to keep his balance. "*Vaya!*"

The policeman, swinging his club, came close enough to take a look at Juan. "You again? For cryin' out loud. You're sure a damn troublemaker."

The little man said, "No wonder you never made detective. This kid ain't the troublemaker. Five guys jumped him."

"I know, I know." The policeman pushed his cap back on his head, wiped his face with a blue bandana. "It's that Panther gang. Only this crazy kid goes looking for 'em. Four fights in two weeks. He sure can take it."

Juan felt inside his mouth, pulled out a blood-stained tooth, looked dumbly down at it.

The policeman said, "I oughtta run him in. I warned him last time he wants a fight, not on my beat."

The little man took Juan's arm. "Lemme help you over to my car."

Juan pulled away, stumbling. "*El grande Americano,*" he said, with as much contempt as he could muster. "Mind own business. *Vaya!*"

"Puerto Ricans are Americans too."

Juan spit viciously. "This for America. Juan no Americano. Juan Spik bastard, lousy Spik bastard." He looked blindly around him. "Where Frankie run like dog? Frankie, come, Juan waits."

The policeman sighed. "What'd I tell you?"

The man was amused. "He talks from heat." He lifted his hand in a signal and a car pulled away from the Drive

and rolled across the cobblestoned gutter. "C'mon, Juan, let's go. You're gonna see a doctor."

Juan's head came around stiffly, his eyes on the blue and red convertible. Not budging as the car stopped inches away, he stared at the redheaded girl at the wheel.

The man said, "You sore at the car too, you crazy kid?"

The policeman twirled his club. "They're all nuts. One minute they sing, the next they're battling like wildcats."

The man opened the car door. "We'll get your face plastered up just to make you presentable for your next scrap with Frankie."

Juan took a step away, stumbled drunkenly. He took another hitch on his torn shirt sleeve, rolled it past the elbow. He touched the blood spots on his shirt.

"Go away, Americano," he said.

The man pushed Juan into the car. "You talk too damn much." Squeezing in beside him, he said, "Let's go, Toni."

The redhead had moved as far away as she could. "Don't mind me, Manny!" she snapped. "One more inch and he's in my lap."

Juan looked her over, deliberately, insolently. She was a pretty girl, except her lips were thick with lipstick and her brown eyes were too small.

"Get started," the man said. "Later you can give me speeches."

She touched the wheel. "Let me in on the secret, why we got dirty pants for company?"

"He needs a doc."

"There must be more, Mr. Cole. He ain't one of your relatives?"

Manny Cole yelled, "I don't want to see him bleed to death. I'd do the same for you."

Her lips tightened. "I wonder."

Cole waved to the policeman and the car went around the corner, while Juan sat stiffly, pain wracking his body, misery in his heart.

Manny Cole said, "How come you start fights with Frankie?"

Juan's jaw muscles jumped as he clenched his teeth. He leaned back, relaxed. "They spit on Juan," he said bitterly. "Lousy Spik, go back to Puerto Rico."

"So they spit. It's happened before. It'll happen again. You think it was different in my day?"

The girl groaned. "Spare me the gory details, Manny."

Manny ignored her. "I used to walk up Cherry Street and the Irish banged hell out of me. Down Madison Street, the Wops had their fun. Bothering nobody, all of a sudden a kid from half a block away points his dirty finger and I got Coxey's army after me."

Toni said, "Tell him how you still get headaches from those beatings. I'm just dying to hear it again."

Manny said, "We got even. The public baths was on our block. When they came to use our pool we got them inside and outside. One Irish kid almost drowned. Hadda pump the water out of him."

Juan's voice was husky. "That is right?"

Manny shrugged. "We were kids. Irish, Wop, Jew, it was nothing but a means of identification. If everybody had the same nationality and religion we'd fight among ourselves, I guess. How you gonna reason with kids? Once there was nobody but Irish in the neighborhood. The first Jews who moved in had a bad time, until more Jews came. Later, the Italians moved in. They got it from both sides, Jews and Irish. Now it's the Puerto Ricans."

Juan cried, "Some day, Juan got plenty friends. Juan show them."

"Sure," Manny said. "That's the way it goes. Some day some other nationality is gonna take it from the Puerto Ricans. It never stops. So you get a beating. Why don't you stop bellyachin'?"

Juan said fiercely, "Beatings Juan take. Some things Juan no can take. For that Juan give it to them. Frankie, Juan cut into little pieces."

"Kid talk."

Juan's voice shook with anger. "Every day Juan swear it. By the blood of Papa an' Mama."

Manny Cole's forehead puckered. "What did Frankie do to you, Juan? It can't be just the beatings."

Juan didn't answer, staring straight ahead, burning inside with his thoughts.

They found a doctor's office on Rivington Street and despite Juan's weak protests, Manny Cole steered him up a row of steps and into the office. In fifteen minutes, his wounds treated with medication and hidden from view by big strips of gauze and adhesive tape, Juan was out the door.

He stood on the steps debating with himself whether to go home or stay and thank the Americanos. Not that the Americanos deserved special thanks. Had Juan asked to be taken to a private doctor? Was not the hospital on Gouverneur Street good enough? But he had to show the Americanos that even a Puerto Rican could say thank you.

They came out, the redheaded Toni and Manny Cole, and they seemed surprised that he was still there.

Toni said, "Why don't you run along, boy?"

Manny Cole said, "Lay off him. Lucky thing you didn't need stitches, Juan."

Toni jumped as a couple of dogs began to scrap in the center of the street. The smaller dog, a shaggy gray poodle, scooted up the street. The larger dog, a brown smooth-skinned mutt, smelled around a pump, lifted his hind leg to wet, then trotted to a garbage pile to sniff a bitch who was busy chewing on a chicken bone. A boy came running down the street, tried to jump over the garbage pile, missed, landed in the center, and the dogs ran.

Juan said, "Dogs run like crazy."

Manny laughed. "Yeah, did y'see them go?"

Two drunks, supporting each other, went by on rubber legs, and suddenly one went down, pulling the other with him. The first drunk swung his legs off the sidewalk and sat on the curb, and cried noisily.

Toni shuddered. "I got the creeps. Will you get me out of here, Manny?"

Manny said to Juan, "You look good when you smile, kid. C'mon, we'll ride you home."

Toni was angry. "You ride him, not me."

"He'll sit in the back."

Juan's smile was gone, the bitterness back in his heart. "Juan got feet, can walk good. *Muchas gracias. Buenas noches.*"

"So long," Manny said. "Stay away from Frankie."

Hands deep in his pockets, Juan turned the corner into Norfolk Street. He liked Manny Cole. The man had treated him decently, spent time and money on a Puerto Rican he'd never seen before, and what was more important, asked nothing in return.

"Juan! Hey, Juan, wait a minute. You have to walk so fast?"

Juan stiffened. What did he want for the three-dollar doctor fee, an arm or a leg?

Manny Cole was breathing heavily, as if he'd run all the way. "Kid, I've been thinking. How would you like to be a fighter?"

Startled, Juan stared. "Juan fighter?"

"I can make you a good boxer in six months. You can make a lot of money, *dinero*, *gelt*. Thousand-dollar bills like nothing."

Juan hung his head. "Juan go home." He walked on, the man at his heels. "*Padre*, him get mad Juan out late."

"Listen to me! Don't you want to learn to fight? Those punk kids would think twice before picking on you. They'd never start a fight."

Juan didn't mean to snarl. The words just shot out of him. "They no start nothing. Juan start fight. Dogs!"

Manny whistled soundlessly. "The cop was right. I don't get it."

"Frankie," he said, rolling his lips with relish. "Him Juan start fight. Every week, every time Juan see him, we fight. First Frankie, he beat Juan good. Next time Juan hit him sometime. Tonight, Juan hit him good. Next time maybe Juan beat him. When Juan beat Frankie very, very good, Juan kill him like nothing."

Manny mopped his face. Pleading, he said, "Will you cut out that killing business? I don't know why I waste my time on you. Lay off Frankie, will you? You ain't got a Puerto Rican chance. What happened tonight? You slug him down for a count and the whole gang piles on you.

You can't beat Frankie because the gang won't let you. Listen to me, boy. You want money?"

Juan stopped before his building on Norfolk Street. "*Padre*, he no like Juan should fight."

"Maybe we can change his mind for him. Kid, be smart. Maybe you don't need money. Maybe you like the garbage and the stink. Maybe you like it so damn much you wanna enjoy it for the rest of your life."

Juan hung his head. "Here is not bad. The Fanguito where Juan live in San Juan, it stink like something you no know. Juan go up."

As Juan moved into the darkness of the hallway Manny Cole cried after him, "Go on upstairs where you belong. How stupid can you get? You don't need money? Don't you know there are things in life you don't get less you got it? Prestige. You know what prestige means?"

Juan didn't want to stop. He couldn't help himself. Fists clenched at his sides, he stood stiffly, listened to Manny's voice ring in the narrow hallway, and he could feel his heart beating as the words echoed through the building.

"Without money you're a bum. With money you're a big wheel. Go on upstairs. I don't know why the hell I'm working up a sweat about you. A kid like you I can find on any street corner."

Juan turned slowly.

Manny stepped into the hallway, his body blackly outlined against the outside lamplight. "Go on up. What you hanging around for? You don't want money, you don't wanna be a big shot. You'll go up to your stinking flat and for the rest of your life people will look at you and say, 'There goes a lousy Spik.' All your life that's all

you're gonna hear. Maybe you wouldn't like to hear people talk like that. Maybe you'd rather hear them say, 'There goes Juan, he's got plenty dinero, he's the Champ!' So long, you bum. Tomorrow, I'll be up O'Breen's gym at one o'clock making some other kid into a big shot. And you could be that kid so damn easy. O'Breen's gym, one o'clock. . . ."

Suddenly the solid blackness that was Manny Cole was gone and Juan could see the street and the people going by, and he walked outside, stood there looking up and down the street. A bag of garbage came down, missing a woman by inches, the paper bursting open to scatter its contents over the street. Boys, drinking beer out of cans, crossed the street. Americano boys! Juan backed into the hallway, slunk up the stairs.

3.

In O'Breen's gym two men were slugging it out in the center of the ring, their trainers yelling advice. A big man moved clumsily around the heavy bag, punching awkwardly. As Juan cut across the floor where he had glimpsed Manny Cole, a lanky dark-skinned boy skipped rope around him. Open-mouthed, Juan stopped to admire the boy's skill in keeping the rope from tangling with his dancing feet.

A bell rang so loudly it startled Juan. Activity stopped in the gym. Juan waited a few seconds but when the boy flung the rope aside and stretched out on a mat, he sighed and continued his walk to where Manny Cole was kneeling by a sweat-shirted man.

Juan tucked his checkered sports shirt deeper into his corduroy pants, ran a hand across his black and shiny hair, wiped the vaseline-smeared hand on his trousers. He coughed twice before Manny Cole looked around.

Juan grinned. "*Saludos, amigo.*"

"*Saludos* yourself." To the man on the mat, he said, "Do push-ups, Jimmy. Lift your ass. It's got muscles too."

Juan shifted his feet uncomfortably. "Today Juan feel good."

Manny Cole's agate eyes centered on a spot over Juan's head. "What brings you up here?"

"You tell Juan to come, no?"

"That was last week. You took the tape off your face a little too early; I can see a couple raw spots. Jimmy, for Chris' sake, you don't get nothing out of exercise less you put your heart into it. Up! Up!"

Juan's smile disappeared. The Americano had asked him to come up to O'Breen's gym and now he acted as if he had changed his mind.

Juan said hesitatingly, "You say, 'Juan, I make you lot dinero.' "

Cole said dully, "You come up here so I could show you how to line your pockets with hundred-dollar bills."

Juan chuckled. "You say t'ousand dollar bills, *sí?*"

"Some days you can't even make a nickel."

Juan said intensely, "Juan be big shot, *sí?*"

"You don't want people calling you dirty Spik."

Savagely, "Juan be clean Spik."

"Money will make you clean."

"*Sí! Sí!* Money make Juan clean like anything."

Manny Cole stood up, slipped an arm around Juan's shoulder. Juan felt a tremor run up his spine as Manny

Cole said, "Just wanted to get the record straight. You're gonna work hard. Sometimes you'll wish I'd drop dead so you can quit. Some days you'll wish it's you who drops dead. But we'll make it, you and me. Now take a walk around the place. When I'm through with Jimmy here, I'll talk to you. I want to know all about you. How old are you?"

"*Diez y siete.* Excuse, seventeen, *amigo.*"

"You look older. Anyway, I'll be through in a couple minutes. Tomorrow we'll start training."

"*Mañana.*"

"*Mañana,* banana, slice it up and it's still tomorrow. . . ."

In the next three months Juan was taught the fundamentals of boxing. Patient Manny Cole, using himself as a model, showed Juan how to move around while snapping a left jab, how to sidestep a hook with his left hand. Dressed in a sweat shirt and khaki shorts, woolen socks and heavy sneakers, Juan moved, shifted, sidestepped, jabbing and hooking, jabbing and hooking, hour after hour, day after day, until he was sick of it.

"One hand," he cried. "What Juan do with other hand?"

"Right now, stick it where it can rest up. Next week . . ."

The following week Cole taught Juan how to cross the right hand to obtain maximum leverage and power. Juan learned how to uppercut, how to pump a two-fisted barrage against a man's ribs, how to throw punches in effective combinations.

Cole did not neglect Juan's defensive training. He

taught Juan how to roll away from a man's blow, how to let the punch bounce harmlessly off his arms or shoulders, how to block with his right hand, how to step inside a blow so that it traveled around his neck, how to ride with a punch so that the power behind it was spent by the time it landed.

Juan worked hard, shadow-boxing, punching light and heavy bags, spitting, swearing, the sweat pouring down his face and body as he skipped rope and struggled through a series of calisthenics.

Weeks went by, months, and one day, bursting with impatience, Juan cried, "*Car-ramba!* Juan get sick from this business. T'ree months, work like dog! When? When Juan get *dinero?*"

Cole chewed gum, smiled. "I told you when we started, this is a six-month course."

"Six! Juan got big bellyache. Juan sick."

Cole said, "We'll see how sick you are tomorrow when you stack up against a real live sparring partner. Learn to handle yourself in a ring and we're on our way. *Dinero!* Good old *dinero!*"

For the next month Juan boxed with a youngster who'd had sixteen amateur fights and was now in training for his first professional bout. The month after, Juan did a daily two rounds with a boy from Chicago now in New York for his third money-paying fight. For a week, unable to obtain a suitable sparring partner, Juan fretted and fumed.

Pointing to a man belaboring the heavy sand bag, Juan cried, "Why Juan not box him?"

"Because one: he's too smart for you. Two: he's too heavy for you. Three: he gets paid for sparring. Four: a

couple days out of action won't hurt. It'll give us a chance to work on your habit of dropping your right hand every time you jab."

The last week in March Juan learned that he'd been matched for a four-round opening fight the following Monday at St. Nick's arena.

"*Qué bueno!*" he shouted. "*Gracias, amigo, gracias.*"

"Take care of yourself," Cole said. "It's a long week. Seven big days for you to keep healthy. If you get no colds, no sprains, no cuts and no bellyaches, you'll make yourself fifty bucks."

Two days before the fight, a cool sunny morning, Juan walked out of his hallway and came face to face with Frankie, Joe and Lippy.

When Juan opened the door to a knock, he found Manny Cole standing there in the semidarkness.

Squinting, Cole said, "Juan? How come you didn't come to the gym? Holy cow!" His eyes became big as half dollars. "Lookit that face!"

Juan smiled thinly. "Every minute Juan look in mirror. Not so good, eh?"

Manny Cole rocked on his heels. "Six months breaking my hump and a couple days before the fight you do this to me."

Bewildered, Juan shook his head. The Americano didn't understand. "Juan no do it. Them—"

"Don't spell it out for me."

Juan glanced behind him, moved out into the hallway, closing the door. "Mama, she sleep." He walked to the chipped stone stairs, sat down. The odor of cooking was heavy in the damp air. White teeth gleaming in his brown

face, Juan said with deep satisfaction. "This time Juan give Frankie good. Like you show Juan."

"Then the whole gang jumped you."

He puckered his lips for a moment, smiled. "Juan give good, left right, up'cut. Joe hit Juan with something. Lippy, he kick Juan right here." He pointed to a white patch over his left eye. "Next time Juan catch Frankie maybe there be no Joe, no Lippy, no nobody."

Cole cried, "There won't be a next time! You're a pro boxer. Every delay, an hour, a day, anything, holds you back that much. We sweated blood to get you ready. Now we'll have to lay off till that eye heals. Then we'll sweat more. But what's the use if you keep tangling with that gang of hoods? Suppose the next time they break your leg or your arm? They could cripple you for life. You got to stay away from Frankie!"

Juan touched Manny's coat lapel. "You no be mad at Juan. Hokay, Frankie, him can wait. First, Juan make lot money. Then—Juan got plenty time."

Cole shook his head sadly. "You sure can carry a grudge. How do I know Frankie will stay away from you? Where is this Panther Club?"

"Clinton by Stanton. You no can go in. You no member."

Cole snapped, "If I crawl in on my knees, maybe they won't get sore. Now you take it easy. We'll postpone this fight for a couple weeks or so. I'll know more when I see that eye in the morning."

Juan got up. "You go down club, you be careful like anything. That Joe got big knife."

Cole started down the steps. "I know, I've seen it."

Juan stood on the landing, looking down the stairwell, and as he watched Cole's hand sliding down the wooden rail, listened to the slap of his shiny leather shoes on the marble steps, he was thinking that Señor Cole might need help. Going down the Panthers Club, one skinny man against twenty or more gorillas, was a dangerous thing to do. That Señor Cole, he seemed afraid of nothing. Or, perhaps, he didn't understand.

Quickly Juan went into his house, found his leather jacket and cap. Juan caught up with Manny as he was descending the stairs leading to the Club. Cole looked up in surprise, hesitated, then decided.

"May as well get you and the gang face to face, then we'll know what the score is and what it's gonna be from now on."

A fourteen-year-old boy opened the door to Cole's insistent knocking. Before he could open his mouth to ask questions, Cole pushed past him. Juan hesitated a brief second then followed quickly. Around a table sat four boys. Juan recognized them as the ones they called Doc, Joe, Frankie and Artie. From across the room, where Juan could see two girls sprawled on a couch, came the one they called Lippy, his face twisted in surprise.

"Spik!" he cried. "Hey, fellers, a Spik walked in here."

The boys came away from the table, spread out like a fan, came around the two visitors. A door opened in the far corner of the room, and Juan saw a gas range and the one who called himself Shlemie walk heavily across the room. Juan's muscles grew tight as he looked around him, wishing they had not walked into this trap. Before he could ever get out, he was sure, he would have many more cuts on his face, more aches in his ribs. He faced

Frankie, took a half-step closer, hoping if a fight started, he could get his hands around Frankie's throat.

And suddenly the hate came up from inside him and Juan spit. "This for Frankie!"

Cole turned on him. "Now cut that out!"

Frankie's gray eyes were cold, lusterless. "We'll wipe that spit off the floor with his face."

Cole said, "Never mind the crap. I want to talk to you, Frankie."

Lippy sounded sleepy. "Nobody but Club guys is supposed to come down to this here club. You guys wanna walk out or be carried out?"

Frankie said to him, "Douse that goddam cigarette. I told you a million times—"

Juan sniffed. The cigarette, thin as a lollipop stick, had a peculiar odor, like tea leaves burning.

Lippy began to sing, "Geez, I can rip a tiger in half. I sure feel jazzy. Hey, mister, you feel jazzy?"

Frankie pushed him. "Shut up. Okay, mister, say your piece."

"Bust him," Joe said. "Bust their goddam brains out."

Doc Kramer spoke up. "What you want, mister?"

Cole said, "I'm Manny Cole. I manage boxers. Right now I got Juan under my wing."

Shlemie laughed. "Him a fighter? I could take him with one hand."

Juan blew air into his fists. How nice it would be to have that Shlemie alone in a room! *Con mucho gusto.*

Cole said, "I don't want Juan getting hurt before every fight. You guys got to lay off him."

"Screw you," Lippy said. "We're gonna bust every Spik what comes in this neighborhood."

Cole waved a finger. "I'm telling you to stay away from my boy. Next time I won't talk. I'll come down here with a couple of my boys and clean out this joint."

Swearing, Joe Kusack pulled out his knife. The blade flew open even as he stabbed at Cole's mid-section. Doc grabbed his arm, held tightly.

"Take it easy, Joe," he pleaded, then as if it were a joke, "For cryin' out loud, you wanna get blood all over our clean floor?"

Joe tried to shake him off. "I don't like guys pissin' in my face."

Cole said, "If this is how you want it."

Doc said, "Why don't you beat it, mister? I can't hold onto this arm all night. What do you say, fellers, we give the Spik a break?"

"Break his head," Artie Dorfman said.

Doc said, "Maybe he could give us a couple tickets to his fight once in a while."

Shlemie cried, "I don't take nothin' from a Spik. Let's give it to him, Frankie. What you say, Frankie?"

Frankie shrugged. "Maybe Doc's right. Maybe we should give him a break."

The gang looked at each other as if they weren't sure they'd heard right.

"Frankie," Joe cried, "you know what you sayin'?"

Frankie said, "Say, Cole, when's the Spik boxing?"

"He's having his first fight in a couple weeks or so. Maybe I could spare them tickets."

Joe moaned. "Frankie, don't sell us down the river for a lousy couple tickets. Take y' goddam tickets and stick 'em."

Frankie's eyes shifted to Juan, studied his face. "You boxing on a ticket show?"

Juan looked at Cole, who answered. "Yeah. The boxers got a choice, fifty bucks or half of the tickets he can sell."

Frankie looked down at the floor. "A guy with friends could make himself a nice buck."

Cole shrugged. "The kid's got no friends. I could sell sixty, seventy bucks' worth, but half of that is no good so we'll take the fifty and be happy."

Frankie clucked. "Guess it's rough on the kid, no friends."

Juan laughed derisively. "Juan got plenty friends in San Juan. Some day . . ." He clenched his teeth. Some day those friends would come, Ramón, Hugo, his cousins Pablo and José.

Artie Dorfman said, "What's all the talk about? I'm gettin' a earache."

Frankie looked very sad. "I think we did enough damage to the kid. He don't come looking for trouble, we'll lay off him."

The gang began to grumble, but a look from Frankie made them quiet down, all except Joe.

"Hey, Lippy, got a smoke for Frankie? He's blowed his top."

Frankie's voice had the ring of authority. "I said we lay off the kid." He held out his hand. "Glad you dropped in, Manny. Whenever you're around, come in and say hello."

Cole looked puzzled. "Sure, Frankie. If you want any special favors, case you want to see some fight or maybe watch a pro in training, just let me know."

Juan shook his head. "*No comprendo, amigo.* Something, it smell bad like anything."

Joe Kusack said, "I could a told you, Frankie. Give a Spik a break and he thinks you're out for somethin'."

Cole cleared his throat. "You can't blame Juan. After all, you guys have been kind of rough on him."

Frankie said, "Sure, we understand." He took a cigarette out of his crumpled pack. "Any time, Juan, you can come down the Club."

Juan's lips twisted. "No more Spik."

Frankie struck a match. "You're a white Spik."

Juan's voice was harsh as he said to Manny, "*Arriba!* Juan white Spik."

Cole took his arm, squeezed it just as Juan was ready to cry out something hard and dirty.

"So long, fellers," Cole said.

Frankie waved. "Come again. You too, Juan-boy."

Cole pushed Juan out the door, through the hallway.

"Why the hell you so steamed up?" he said. "Frankie tried to make up."

"Why?"

Cole went up the steps. "I don't know. But what's the difference? I don't care why he's gonna lay off, just that he does. Maybe he's lying. Maybe he's playing some kind of game. If he is, I'll kill the no-good bastard. Lousy punks!"

Hands deep in his pockets, Juan said, "Like a snake, that Frankie."

"We'll find out soon enough. Go on home. Come down the gym tomorrow so the doc can look you over. By the way, kid, *gracias* for comin' down the Club to protect me."

4.

In O'Breen's gym, one month later, Manny Cole gave Juan the news for which he'd been waiting.

"Next week, four rounds at the Parkway. For God's sake, kid, don't get that gang on your tail."

Juan was surprised. "Juan they don' hit no more. Frankie, Juan's *amigo*." He sneered. "*Amigo mío*."

Cole pointed a finger at Juan. "Now you cut it out. The guy's trying to be your friend but you don't let him. Forget what happened a hundred years ago. It's now what counts. He starts nothing, you do likewise. You understand that?"

Groping for words to express himself, Juan said, "*Por qué?* Why Frankie be Juan friend? *No comprendo*."

"You don't have to *comprendo*. Frankie's getting older. He finally realizes that ganging up on a guy gets you nothing."

Juan shrugged. "Maybe so. Frankie say him got plenty *amigos* who buy ticket for fight."

"And you don't believe the guy is your friend!"

"Twenty cents, Frankie say him keep."

"Twenty per cent?"

"*Sí*."

Cole scratched his head. "It ain't such a bad deal. Hell, we got nothing to lose. We get fifty bucks guarantee. So every ticket we sell over the hundred-dollar mark will give us half the sale price of the ticket; twenty per cent for Frankie, thirty for us, sounds okay. Tell you what:

You tell Frankie he splits the fifty per cent with us, after we sell a hundred dollars' worth. That'll make him hustle."

Juan scowled. Frankie wasn't to be trusted, on that he would bet his life.

"Maybe Juan tell Frankie no hokay, drop dead."

Cole thought it was very funny. "You'll tell him nothing of the kind. Tomorrow I'll go up and see Gary Seward, the promoter. We'll take a hundred bucks' worth of pasteboards. If you get rid of those, Gary will give you more." He smiled shrewdly. "Just to set your mind at ease, we'll trust Frankie only twenty-five dollars' worth of tickets at a time."

Juan breathed deeply. "*Sí, sí.* You know what Juan got in head."

"I read you good. I want you to stay on the good side of the gang. Not too close. Hello and good-bye. *Hola* and *hasta la vista.* I say it real good, eh, *amigo mío?* I wish to hell you could get out of the neighborhood. Then we wouldn't have to play up to those stinkers. Some day, maybe. You go down to the Panthers Club?"

"Two times, like you tell Juan."

Cole looked troubled. "Just don't make a habit of it. I don't want you mixed up with any hoodlums. . . ."

The Parkway had a capacity crowd the night Juan boxed Carl Waters, a rough-and-tough Bronx boy. Juan, sitting in his corner, waiting for the introductions, could hear the spectators shouting. At first he paid no attention, then suddenly he realized they were calling him by name.

"Lousy Spik, get your brains knocked out!"

"Puerto Rico, you no-good bastard!"

"You'll get yours, but good!"

Juan looked at Cole. "What Juan done, everybody no like him?"

Cole leaned against the ropes, looked around. "They paid for the privilege of calling everybody names. That's what the newspaper guys tell me. It ain't just you. . . ." Puzzlement narrowed his eyes. "I don't know. They sound real mean tonight. That's the way it is. Once in a while you get a bastard in the crowd who likes to call names. Tonight everybody is acting up. Maybe it's bastard night."

When Juan was introduced by the announcer, he stood up, took a bow and the shouts became louder, obscene, and he felt suddenly cold and self-conscious, as if they were looking at his naked body.

"Get killed, you gangster!"

"Cokie Spik crook!"

Manny Cole blinked. "I don't get it. Wait a minute—that's it! Chris', am I stupid! I must have been in a fog. . . . Don't mind them, kid. Just go out there and beat Waters through the ropes. You can do it." He ran his fingers across Juan's shoulder, down his arm.

Juan almost came up out of his seat. "*Dios!*"

Cole smiled. "You sure are jumpy. Take it easy."

Juan looked out at the maze of figures that was the crowd. Why was everybody against him? Just because he was a Puerto Rican, they were calling him names. And how many times had Manny Cole, his friend, told him that in the fight game it wasn't what you were or where you came from that counted, what did matter was who is your manager and what are his connections and can you fight. Manny had been wrong. Lousy Spik, that's what they were yelling.

Abruptly he shouted, "You lousy, not Juan, you, Americanos."

"What the—!" Cole cried.

The bell rang. In a burst of fury Juan shot out of his corner. Carl Waters barely had time to get his arms up before the leather barrage hit him from all sides. The voices of the crowd were a drone in Juan's ears. All he could see was this Americano before him, a stumbling retreating Americano with a stupid look on his punch-marked face, and Juan had to catch him and beat him through the floor.

Kill the Americano! Kill him dead!

The ropes suddenly opened up and Carl Waters disappeared into the hole. Juan stood flatfooted, watching Waters untangle himself from a row of typewriters. Somebody was pushing him, yelling in his ear. He snarled something, stood there, gloved hands at his sides.

Then Waters was coming through the ropes and the referee was between them. Juan tried to push him aside. Kill, kill, kill! Waters was in the ring, moving away. Juan caught him in a neutral corner and, science completely forgotten, punched from his heels until Waters sank to the canvas floor.

Again the referee was between them, pointing to a far corner.

"No!" Juan cried. "Juan kill Americano dog."

The referee blinked. "Get to a corner or I don't count."

Out of the corner of his eye, Juan saw Manny Cole's waving arms. Manny's face was red, his eyes ready to pop.

"Move!" he cried. "Move or you're dead."

Reluctantly, Juan went to the far corner, stood there while the referee counted ten.

By the time they returned to their dressing room, Juan had calmed down enough to listen to Cole.

"You crazy or something? Losing your head, punching when you should've stood off and set Waters up for a right-hand shot? And then standing there arguing with the ref? Maybe that crowd had a right to be sore, some of them anyhow. Don't ask questions. I'll explain later." Cole helped him remove the cotton robe. "Take a shower and get dressed. It's time I said hello to your family."

Juan said dryly, "Maybe Papa no say hello."

"He still against your boxing for a buck?"

Juan frowned. "*Padre mío*, stubborn like donkey."

Cole kept looking at the door as if he were expecting someone. "Say, how did Frankie do with those tickets?"

A drop of sweat ran down Juan's nose. He wiped it off with his forearm, then held the hand out so that Cole could snip off the tape and bandage.

"Oh, that Frankie sell plenty. *Cinco veces*, five times Juan get tickets."

Cole shuddered. "Five hundred dollars' worth?"

Juan held up his hand, fingers open. "*Sí*. One hundred dollars Frankie get. One hundred fifty dollars us get. That is right, no?"

Cole slapped his forehead with his palm. "Boy, I'm sure a dummy."

Juan stared blankly. "Juan do something?"

"Not you. Me. I shoulda had my head examined."

The door opened and a heavily built man came in, his blue eyes sweeping the room, coming to rest on Cole. The other boxers and managers in the room looked up, nodded hello. The man returned their greetings but he

didn't seem to be very happy. As if, Juan thought, he had a lot of ugly things in his mind.

"Hello, Tim," Cole said with a heartiness that was obviously assumed. "Juan, this is Tim White, one of the greatest boxing commissioners in the country."

White said brusquely, "That's not what you said at the last meeting of the Manager's Guild."

Cole wiped Juan's face with a towel. "You want to talk to me, Tim?"

"You know damn well I do."

"I don't know nothing."

"Then it's time you learned. I'm surprised, Manny. You had a damn good record. You'd be the last one in the game I'd want to accuse of pushing people around. Extortion and coercion are pretty nasty."

Bewildered, Juan looked from one to the other. Manny Cole, short, thin, Tim White tall as a giant, big in the chest.

Manny said, "I wish to hell I knew what you were talking about."

White said, clearly and swiftly, "You and your boy sold a lot of tickets for tonight's show. I just checked with Gary Seward."

"Five hundred dollars' worth. It's been done before."

"By a kid Puerto Rican?"

"He's got a lot of friends."

White waved his hand. "Don't gimme that. I got calls, letters. Some of his friends didn't like the idea of getting blackjacked into buying tickets."

Cole stared at Juan's chest. "I didn't sell those tickets."

"I didn't say you did; you'd know better. Somebody did. Maybe it wasn't even Rivera, but some of his friends could have helped push the sale."

Juan had the feeling that he wasn't present, that he was offside on the stage listening to these two men discuss somebody he knew.

Cole said, "Don't you know? Didn't those bellyachers give you the details?"

White took out a soiled handkerchief, mopped his florid face. "If I knew definitely, I wouldn't be here talking to you. I'd act, you can bet on that. Those letters, telephone calls—all anonymous. The same reason that made those poor slobs buy the tickets is keeping their mouths shut. Pushcart peddlers hooked for buck-twenty tickets or their carts overturned; storekeepers had to buy or take a chance of getting their windows smashed or maybe a stink bomb dropped in their stores. It's a cryin' shame, Manny. God knows the boxing racket's got enough black eyes—"

Manny Cole seemed taller now, tougher, as he yelled, "Why pick on me and the kid? What the hell have we got to do with lousy peddlers and storekeepers?"

Juan saw the heads turned in his direction and he felt suddenly ashamed. Frankie, that no good Frankie, that *diablo perro*, that devil dog.

White was calmer now. "Those peddlers know the kids who sold them the tickets, kids called Frankie, Cheesy, Shlemie, Doc, Joe, Artie, Lippy and a half dozen others, Limey, Patsy—all from Rivera's neighborhood. Those supersalesmen even mentioned Rivera in their talks. I can check the numbers—"

Cole said, "I'm not denying they were our tickets, just that he had nothing to do with pushing them. I'll refund the full price of the ticket to any peddler who comes to see me."

White's lips were pulled back, baring big tobacco-stained teeth. "You sure are being cute. You know those peddlers are too scared to kick openly. They gave us names of the gang but nobody wants to be a complainant. They're scared. If I could get one or two storekeepers to testify, I'd blow the whistle on you. But without a complainant we can't do a thing."

Cole shrugged. "What do you want me to do?"

"You'll attend a commission meeting next week."

"I got nothing else to do with my time?"

"We got complaints and we got to follow them up."

"Screwball complaints."

"Maybe. . . . You better keep your nose clean from here on in."

"Save it, Tim. I don't have to take that crap."

White looked suddenly old and tired. "I'm just telling you for your own good." He glanced at Rivera. "And for the kid's good."

White was gone and there was silence in the room.

Juan said, "Dirty Frankie."

Cole turned to the boxers and their managers in the room. "Okay, the show's over. Damn that White, making speeches in front of a crowd. Juan, listen to me. You still got to be friendly with that mob. You got to say hello. Before every fight we'll give them some comps to keep them happy. Buy them a beer once in a while. Just keep them off your tail for six months or so. Then we'll be making enough money to get you out of the East Side. Go take your shower. I'll take you home."

5.

A DOG barked as Juan and Manny walked up the stone steps to the fourth-floor landing. A woman's thin voice quieted the dog. Even before Juan opened the door to his apartment the babble of voices could be heard through the rickety wood door.

Behind him, Cole muttered, "This Grand Central Station?"

The apartment was filled with relatives, either visiting or living with the Rivera family. Juan took Cole around, introduced him to each in turn.

Cole whispered, "You don't have to, not everyone—How do you do, Señor Gonzales? Yeh, *me gusto mucho* also. One week in here and I'd talk Spanish like a native."

After a while the friends left and Juan pushed Cole into a bridge chair against the wall. Juan was glad the friends had gone. Now if his two aunts and two uncles and fifteen-year-old cousin, Herberto, would go to bed, Señor Cole could talk to Mama and Papa and perhaps Señor Cole could make Papa understand that there were better places to live in than this apartment. This was a living room? Broken bridge chairs lined against the bare walls, a table and four matching chairs, a lamp on an end table —those didn't make a living room. Some apartments he had seen had soft chairs, oilcloth rugs with beautiful-colored floral designs. . . .

Cole whispered to him, "Your aunts, uncles and cousin, they got a place of their own?"

Juan smiled. "They got bedroom. Manny think maybe Juan family sleep in one room?"

Cole apologized. "I don't know where I got my crazy idea."

Juan laughed. "Soon they get some place else, then maybe Juan sleep in bedroom."

Cole said, "So many people in one apartment, it's a wonder somebody doesn't get mixed up and climb into the wrong bed."

About to answer, Juan was interrupted by his aunts kissing him good night.

Cole got up. "*Buenas noches* to you, too. You betcha. So long, uncle. The same to you."

The relatives went into the bedroom and it was suddenly quiet in the room. Mama sat down, stretched her thick legs out as far as they could go. She looked worried, her soft brown eyes searching Papa's face where he sat at the table.

"Tired," she said, sighing.

Papa, tall and heavy, the trace of a mustache giving his upper lip a dirty appearance, grunted, "Go sleep."

Juan answered Cole's questioning look. "Three cots in kitchen. One Papa, one Mama, one Juan."

"That figures out even."

Papa's eyes came around. Something about Juan's face seemed to fascinate him. He stared wordlessly for a few moments, then dug a cigarette butt out of the ash tray. From his vest pocket, he took a match, struck it across the sole of his shoe. He watched the flame spurt into life, burn halfway down the match, before holding it to the charred end of the cigarette.

A baby began to cry in the kitchen. Mama hurried out, returning in a few moments with Lola, Juan's thirteen-month-old sister, naked except for a dirty pair of socks. Mama stood the baby on the wooden floor; the pacifier firmly clenched in her four teeth, Lola looked around with big sad eyes, still wet with tears.

Cole said, "Hi, Lola. Is that your name, Lola? Hey, *amigo*, thought you told me she's a chatterbox."

Juan said, "Lola talk plenty."

Big eyes searching Cole's face, Lola moved on uncertain legs in his direction. Suddenly she stopped, looked between her legs at the wooden floor boards. Cole followed her gaze. Even as the first drops ran down her dirty legs, Mama reached for her, slapped her behind. Lola howled, the pacifier dropping out of her mouth into the urine. Mama waved a finger at Lola. In Spanish, she said, "You are a bad girl, Lola."

"No," Lola cried. "Good girl."

She wobbled over to Cole, clasped him around a leg.

"No, Lola, no," Juan laughed, pulling her away.

"Let her alone," Cole said. "She ain't finished drying herself."

Mama scooped Lola up, carried her kicking and screaming out of the room.

Cole said to Juan, "There goes your cot—or does she sleep with you?"

Juan gave him a smile. "Juan don' sleep with girl. Lola crib in kitchen."

"Pretty crowded, that kitchen." He looked at Papa. "What y'say, Pop? Your son win tonight. Congratulate him."

Juan tensed, leaned his arms on his knees. Cole had been abrupt, but at last it had come.

Papa blinked. "No *comprendo*."

Cole said, distinctly. "I think you *comprendo*. Juan is a professional fighter. Tonight he had his first fight. He's a winner."

Papa's eyes looked at Juan, wavered. "I no like that."

"It's done."

Hands clasped together in pleading, Juan said, "Soon, *padre mío*, Juan fight again, make more money."

Papa's eyes narrowed. "Tell me, Juan, my son, how you have so much time. To be a box fighter, you train in gym, *sí?* When you train? You got school."

Juan felt the tightness in his chest. He should have told Papa.

"Juan no go to school no more, *padre*."

Papa winced. "No school? *Por qué?*"

Cole said, "Why worry, Pop? He'll make a dollar. Many a boxer made more money than the President of the United States."

Papa ignored Cole. "Juan, my son, you must go school. How else you be somebody? A good trade. . . . A carpenter you wanted for you. That is bad? Better than to be a farmer, better than to stand in the sun, a *machete* in your hands, cut, cut, cut, two dollars a day, four, five months, then go hungry. Like me." He opened his hands and held them out, bony, calloused hands that trembled. "Look, Juan, my son, look good. This because Felipe Rivera work all his life like a dog to make bread for family. Why he work like dog? Because Felipe Rivera got no school. Felipe Rivera know nothing."

Cole said, "That doesn't go for Juan. He knows how to fight. So he'll make money, a lot of money."

"Punch, knock man down, punch till blood, it run like water, head be like clay."

Juan touched his arm. "Juan make money for you, for *mamita mía.* Juan buy Papa big farm."

Papa's back stiffened. His voice shook with emotion. "For Felipe Rivera you make no money. Felipe Rivera need no farm."

Juan could feel the hot tears in his eyes. "Juan take *mamita* away from dirt, stink."

Papa's lips curled. "*Un buen hijo, sí, mamita?* Mama and me, we like dirt, stink."

Juan's voice cracked. Defiantly, he said, "Juan no like. Juan make money. Juan be big shot. Say it, Manny, big shot."

Cole said, "People pointing. There goes Juan Rivera, he's got plenty *dinero,* he's a big shot!"

"See?" The tears overflowed. "No more beating in street. No more dirty Spik. You hear, Papa? No more Spik bastard. Big shot. Juan Rivera got money, Juan Rivera, big shot."

Papa shook his head angrily. "Back to school, Juan. Papa beg you, go back."

Cole got up. "If you folks excuse me, I'm getting out of here. Juan, you rest up for a couple days before you get back to the gym."

Felipe Rivera stumbled to his feet. "No more fight. You hear, Juan?"

The tears ran down his cheeks, into his mouth, sticky, salty. "Papa, you no understand. Juan fight. Juan be big shot."

"While you in this house, no fight. Felipe Rivera speaks."

Juan wiped his face with his fingertips. Softly he said, "Then Juan no stay. Juan go some place. Wait, Manny, Juan come."

"No, Juan." Mama clasped her hands, pleading. "You no go. This your house. Here you belong."

Cole said, "You heard what she said, Juan. Where you think you're going?"

"With you, *amigo mío*."

Cole sneered. "Who the hell invited you? I've got one bed and sleeping three in a bed is hard luck. You got a cot in the kitchen. It's a lot more comfortable than sleeping in a flophouse."

Juan shook his head. "Papa say no fight—"

"You'll straighten it out. What do you say, Papa?"

Papa looked away. "I no hold him here. Like a wild animal let him run."

Mama moaned and covered her face with her hands. Juan slipped his arm around her bowed shoulders. "No cry, *mamita mía,* no cry."

Cole said, "Pop, if you want Juan to get out, tell him so tomorrow, after you've thought it over. I'll take him off your hands. I can get him a bed in the Municipal Lodging House. Bed, meals. The city does that for bums."

Papa gasped, turned to look at Cole. "No! My son no bum."

"It's up to you, Pop. Juan is gonna fight. It's in his blood. Nobody, nothing can stop him from taking a fling at the game. But you can help him, Pop. You and me. Chase him out of the house and I got a real tough job. Gym work is only half the story. The boxer has to be in

condition mentally too. And living in some flophouse can warp a guy's mind. You can't stop it, Pop, so why not give him a hand?"

All the anger gone from his eyes, Papa said sadly, "Stay, Juan, stay. Some day you learn, Papa, he is right. Some day . . . I pray to God it not be too late."

6.

Juan lay sprawled on the couch in the Panthers Club, his head resting on the arm. A few feet away from him the Panthers were shooting craps against the wall. Juan had played and lost and now, a few pennies in his pocket, he waited for Doc Kramer, who had promised to lend him five dollars until his next fight.

"You're faded," Frankie shouted. "What you waiting for?"

Joe Kusack said, "You was born in a hurry or somethin'? You faded me for two bucks. I got three ridin'."

Lippy Valentine said, "I gotcha. Shoot!"

It was quiet, except for the clink of dice rattling in a big fist. A pause, a grunt, the dice skipping across the wooden floor, smacking against the wall, a very short pause, voices abruptly shouting bets.

"I got two."

"Who's layin' it? I'll take four to two."

Juan lit a cigarette. The odds told him that Joe Kusack's point was either four or ten, and Joe would make it, Juan knew. Joe had a knack. Wall or no wall, Joe was good at making points. There were those who scoffed, guys like Frankie and Doc. Nobody, they said,

could take a legitimate pair of dice and make them talk if he had to bounce them off a wall. Nobody. But Joe could.

Joe cried, "Ten, the point."

Joe grunted as he squatted to pick the money from the floor. Swear words. Laughing. Mother lover, somebody said. Frankie's favorite expression lately. Ever since his Mama had come down to the club and slapped him in front of the boys, everybody was a mother lover.

Juan touched the sides of his head where a nerve throbbed painfully for a few moments, the same ache that had started after his third fight. Only now it was in a different part of his head. That big heavyweight he had trained with in O'Breen's had really started that ache. Every time they had clinched, the big giant's big fists had clobbered Juan on the top of the head. Sixteen-ounce gloves, two hundred and twenty pounds of muscle, boom, boom, boom, on his head. Then, in that third fight, Coley Simpson, the big boy from Pittsburgh, had really given Juan a workout. Twice Juan had been down from a bombardment of leather to the head, but he had got up. Sure, Juan hadn't won, but neither had he been K.O.'d. He had shown the fans he could take it.

Dios! His head hurt like something fierce.

"What y'say, *amigo?*" Doc said.

Juan opened his eyes. Doc stood over him, a tight smile on his thin lips.

"Juan head, it hurt little bit. You no win?"

"I been having a losing streak a month straight."

Juan rubbed his eyes with his fingertips. "Headache get worse."

Frankie Davis, counting his money, laughed. "Couple more fights and you won't feel a thing."

Lippy chuckled. "Punchy Rivera, huh, Frankie?"

"Lay off," Doc said.

"That is hokay," Juan said, sitting up. "Juan take care myself, *amigo*."

Shlemie flipped up a quarter which touched the ceiling and, extending his cupped hand behind his back, caught the shiny coin. "*Amigo*," he said, "all the time *amigo*. Call him *shmuck* once in a while, just for a change."

Lippy sucked on a thin cigarette. Abruptly he began to hop from one foot to the other. "Me, I should a been a pug." He rubbed his thumb over his right nostril, snorted. "C'mon, Rivera, I'll take you on for a fast round."

Frankie said, "You gonna take that goddam reefer out of here?"

Shlemie laughed. "Sell Rivera a charge, Lippy. After he smokes, I'll pay a buck to see you battle it out for the loco weed championship."

Lippy took a deep drag, held the marijuana cigarette up. "This makes a guy feel like somethin'. Right, Spik?"

Juan shrugged. "Not bad. Juan head feel better. No get so much pain if Juan smoke one. Juan smoke two, Juan get sick in belly."

Lippy chuckled. "You'll get used to it. Any time you want a couple, I'm in business."

Doc said, "For cryin' out loud, Lip, haven't you got enough customers without him?"

Lippy cried indignantly, "They hurt him? A charge just peps up a guy. How many charges I give 'im for nothin'? Huh?"

Doc mimicked him. "How many I give 'im, huh? Till

you broke him in, you were a big-hearted guy. How many you give 'em after they're hooked?"

"I gotta make a livin' too. You think I'm Santa Claus?"

Frankie flipped Lippy a fifty-cent piece. "Give the Spik a charge. I like to see him do a shadow-boxing routine."

Joe Kusack said. "Them sticks make me sick. I tried one, just to see if I can get a charge. They're for zombies, not for me."

Lippy opened a cardboard box which had once been used for Egyptian cigarettes. "Here y'are, Spik, one stick."

Before he could close the lid, Shlemie had grabbed a cigarette. Even as he turned on Shlemie, Cheesy Dorfman filched one.

"You guys lay off!" Lippy cried, jamming the box into his trouser pocket. "You think these weeds grow on trees?"

Juan lit the marijuana cigarette, breathed deeply.

Doc touched his shoulder. "Why don't you knock it off? They're no good."

Juan didn't answer him. Doc didn't understand. Nobody could understand, unless he had that same sickening ache in his head. Already the headache was disappearing. Just a couple more drags and he would be light on his feet, and soon he would feel like going four rounds. Maybe if he had smoked a cigarette before his last fight, he would have won. A cigarette before every fight and his record would be a lot better than three wins, three losses.

Lippy said, "You guys wanna get real kicks? We had us a real ball over my girl Flo's house. I had me a couple sample packs of H. Just a sniff and, oh boy, the broads is ready for real action."

Joe Kusack said, "I go over to Mendel's and he mixes me a King Kong that makes me wanna rip down a building. Doc'll tell y'."

Doc said, "Yeh. One King Kong and Joe tries to take the clothes off every broad he sees. Me, I'll stick to beer. Hey, Juan, cut it out."

Juan moved around on his toes, left hand pumping, right hand cocked, snorting, blowing air, hooking his left three times in quick succession. *Dios*, if only he had an opponent here now. Big man or little man, it didn't matter.

"Kill him!" Juan chanted. "Knock 'em dead."

"Kill Americano!" Joe cried. "Sing us that one."

Juan obliged. "All Americanos, kill 'em dead. Dog Americanos!"

Lippy's eyes glowed. "Tell you what, Rivera. I got me a sample pack a H—"

Doc wheeled on him. "Don't start that, Lippy."

"I ain't chargin' him nothin'."

"Don't gimme that crap. Like them lollipop sticks. Nothin' for samples, plenty when he's hooked. Lay off him, I'm warning you!"

Frankie said, "Get out, Lippy. G'wan, get the hell out. You wanna push the stuff, do it outside. I don't care what you do someplace else. You get grabbed with the stuff down here, we all get pinched. A million times I told you."

"Okay, okay," Lippy whined. "I'll duck it in the toilet."

"Outside!"

"For cryin' out loud!" Lippy stormed outside, slamming the door hard.

Frankie moved to Juan. "Get rid of the cigarette. And no more smokin' down here, I'm tellin' you. No, no, don't step on it. Drop it in the toilet and flush it down."

Juan's lips curled in amusement. "Frankie damn right."

Frankie's eyes were full of contempt. "One of these days, you won't think it's so funny when I tell you to get out and stay out."

Juan rolled his shoulders, feeling strong, ready for Frankie, hoping Frankie would swing first.

"Now tell me," Juan said. "Say, 'Dirty Spik, stay out.' Say it."

Frankie glanced at Doc, who shook his head. "He goes, I go."

Joe Kusack sighed. "For all I care the Spik can go to hell. But if Doc goes, I go."

Frankie said, "I was just kidding."

Doc said, "Rivera's as good as anybody, for my money."

Frankie said, "He ain't a Panther; he don't work with us."

Doc shrugged. "I was no Panther either but nobody chased me. Juan, you wanted five bucks, didn't you?"

"*Sí, sí,* you got?"

Doc said, "I got ten bucks stashed away. You want it, walk me home."

They went out into the street and as the humid July air hit Juan, he had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. And now his poor head was full of pain again. So soon the effects of the cigarette had worn off! Every time he smoked a weed the warmth and comfort stayed with him for such a short time. Lippy said that the white powder

made you feel a lot stronger and the pain stayed away for hours and hours. Just a sniff, Lippy said, you don't need no mainliners. . . .

"Lenny! Len—ny!"

Crossing the gutter against the light, a girl moved quickly in and out of traffic.

"Jeez," Doc murmured. "My sister."

Juan said, "Juan wait for you on corner."

"No," Doc begged. "I don't want to be alone with her. I don't want her crying all over me."

She stopped a few feet away, hands clasped before her, the moon full on her face, a dark, brooding face, uncertain, perhaps embarrassed.

"How are you, Lenny?"

Doc looked at Juan, shifted his gaze to a cat chewing on something in the garbage pile. "I'm okay. You know my friend Juan Rivera. This is my sister Yetta, *amigo*."

"I've seen him around," she said. "Hello, Juan."

With an exaggerated flourish of hands and body, Juan bowed and said, "*Mucho gusto, señorita.*"

She wasn't listening to Juan. "Lenny, lately we don't see you no more. You'd think you lived in Europe or something."

He wiped his palms on his trousers. Drops of perspiration formed on his upper lip. "I'm around. I just don't get a chance. Aw, what's the use of kidding. You know damn well what happened the last time I went up to see Mama. Your old man—"

"Papa."

"—walked in and raised such a rumpus we nearly had cops." He buried his hands deep in his pockets and said,

sadly, "It's better I don't go upstairs, better for Mama—always crying, always asking do I need money, looking scared when I tell her I get along."

Her words were a whisper. "Shouldn't she be scared, Lenny?"

"Why should she be?"

"Where do you get money to live on?"

He shrugged. "What difference does it make? I do okay. You don't see any cops on my tail."

Juan whistled soundlessly. The cops were on Doc's trail all right, and Frankie's, and the rest of them, but too far back to sprinkle it with salt so they could catch these Panthers. Not only local cops but those big men who worked for the Federal government. The Panthers were brave but also stupid, for everybody knew you couldn't get away from the Federal men, and sooner or later, they had to catch up to you and then you went to that place they called Alcatraz. He'd seen it in the movies.

Rifling letter boxes, stealing government checks which the Debs signed and cashed in stores in different neighborhoods, relief checks and social-security checks the storekeepers were glad to cash if you bought something. All you had to tell them was that you were a new tenant. So easy, the Debs said. Juan shuddered. He was glad he wasn't one of them. Those F.B.I. men could smell you down like bloodhound dogs. . . .

Yetta's face was shiny with sweat, her lips wet, greasy red. "Maybe you need a couple dollars, Lenny?"

Doc laughed. "G'wan, I got plenty. Tell her, Juan, I got plenty."

Juan smiled. "Doc got plenty, hundreds, thousands."

She gasped. "Thousands!"

Doc gave Juan a look. "She can't take a joke. He's only kidding. Honest."

"Sure," Juan said quickly, "Doc got nothing."

Yetta took a step nearer to Doc. "Where do you work, Lenny?"

His head came up stiffly. "I'll send you a letter. What the hell business is it of yours, anyway?" As quickly as it had come, the anger was gone. "I didn't mean that, Yet. It's the damned hot weather. What's with you and Myron?"

She studied her nails, shiny with a colorless polish. "We're getting married in September."

A big grin spread over Doc's face. "Say, that's great. Hey, Juan, how you like that? My sister is getting hitched."

Juan yawned. He was tired. That cigarette had drained out his strength. He wished he were home in bed.

Doc was joyous, as if it were he getting married to his Dolly. Juan sighed. She was a lovely girl, Dolly, but so quiet, and when she came down the Club and mixed with the other girls she was like a virgin in a cathouse. Was she virgin, he wondered. Someday he'd find out. Doc never talked, never boasted like the others. But perhaps he had nothing to boast about.

Doc said, "Once you're married and you get your own place, maybe you'll let me come up. I'd like to have a family to visit once in a while."

"Of course, silly." Her eyes glistened with tears. "You'd be welcome any time, you know that. . . . Lenny, you'll come to my wedding?" Then in a stronger voice, "Yes, you will. I don't care what Papa says." The tears were roll-

ing now. "I don't care what anybody says. You're my brother and a brother should be at his sister's wedding."

Doc's lips quivered. "You're better off without me."

"Promise you'll come, Lenny."

"Papa—"

"Promise on the Torah."

"The Torah? I've almost forgot what it looks like. I promise."

"You'll need money for a suit."

"I won't come like a slob. I don't want your money."

"Take it."

"Keep it up, and I won't come."

"All right, Lenny. Come up and see Mama. . . ."

Juan wasn't listening. Suddenly he felt irritable. Standing in one place did that to him. Lately, he liked to shift around, like in the ring or in the gym, hands and legs moving.

"*Amigo*, you dreaming?"

Doc's voice snapped him to attention. He saw Yetta going around the corner, head high, a contented smile on her face.

"Dreaming, it is bad?" Juan grinned.

"Okay, okay. You want that five or don't you?"

Juan studied his face. "You mad."

Doc's eyes were hot and restless. "Can you imagine me at the wedding, my old man hollering? A heart attack he'd get. That sister of mine sure is buggy. I should spoil her wedding?"

"*Sí.*"

"She can get married without me lousing up Garfein's Restaurant."

"*Sí.*"

"Don't *sí* me so much. Mom don't cry enough?"

"Just five dollars, that is all Juan want."

"I'll give you ten. You see Yetta cry? Like somebody turned on the faucet. A bucket of tears. What the hell's she wanna cry for?"

Juan sighed. "Women cry, men cry, everybody cry sometime."

His lips were drawn back in a stiff smile. "Kids, maybe, not men. You never seen me cry."

Juan smiled to himself. You cried, *amigo*, when your sister was here. And now you cry too. And perhaps tomorrow and the day after and the day after that. Sure, no tears run down your face. And your eyes are so bright and hot, there is no sign of a tear. But, inside, it is different. In your heart, where nobody can see it, the tears flow. I can hear them, *amigo mío*, feel the ache inside you they are trying to wash away.

Doc shouted so loud people turned to look. "What the hell we standing here for?"

7.

Later, the five-dollar bill Doc had loaned him clasped in his fist, Juan stopped in the corner grocery store for a cold can of beer. The holes punctured, he walked the street sipping beer, and when it was gone he flung the empty can as far into the gutter as he could and bought another can.

And when people stared from their stoops, whispering, Juan laughed. The dirty Spik, drinking from a can, like a drunk. Many times he'd see the Americanos drink beer out

of cans, the women too. Somehow, to the Americano, it was different when a Puerto Rican drank beer the same way.

After the fifth can of beer, he began to feel sorry for his friend, Doc Kramer. Poor Doc. It was so lonely for a man to be away from his family. Just a few blocks away, yet for all the good it did him, Doc's family could be in another world. And a man without a family was a nobody. A man should have his Mama and Papa near him, always, for they were of his blood.

He looked up and he was in front of his building. The kids were playing kick baseball, using a fruit can for the ball, the four corners of the intersection for bases. A girl kicked the can just out of reach of the third baseman and scooted to second base before the can was returned to home plate. The catcher banged the can on the corner but the nine-year-old boy said, "Safe by a mile. Yeh, yeh, yeh, she touched second a hour before you got the can."

"Hi, pal."

He heard the familiar voice, looked around, saw nobody, and blamed it on the beer.

"Juan, what's the matter? You don't look good."

A piece of the shadows broke away from the stoop and moved toward him. Shaking his head to clear it, he groaned. The pain in his head was bad.

"It's me, Manny Cole."

"*Hola, amigo. Saludos.*"

Manny seemed disturbed. "I been waiting over an hour. Twelve o'clock is kind of late for a guy in training to come home."

Juan watched a boy kick the can into the eager hands of the first baseman.

"Juan no feel like sleep," he murmured. "So Juan take walk."

Manny Cole cocked his head, sniffed. "What's that smell?"

Juan laughed guiltily. "A little beer no hurt."

Cole frowned. "What the hell are you, a doctor?"

Juan pressed both palms against his ears. The pounding was unbearable. If only he had a charge!

"Juan got big pain in head," he gasped.

Cole's voice was gentle, concerned. "Since when?"

Juan dropped his hands to his sides, looked away. "Ten minutes."

"You ain't been getting those pains before? I gotta know."

"No, no," Juan laughed. "Ten, fifteen minutes."

Hopefully, "Too much beer?"

"Two, three maybe."

"What's that other smell? I can't place it."

Juan feigned indignation. "How you like it Juan say Manny smell like anything?"

Manny smiled faintly. "About that beer—"

Juan lifted his arms in a shrug. "*Sí, sí*, no more beer."

"I told you a thousand times—"

"No beer, no smoke."

Cole shook his head sadly. "It's no joke, boy. We had such big plans for you—" He sighed. "I don't know what went wrong. After your first fight I thought you'd be a second Kid Gavilan, ripping, tearing, knocking a man out before he could get set. Then—I don't know, Juan."

"Next time Juan win good."

"We'll see."

The children had quit their kick-baseball game and were now playing tag around the garbage.

Cole said grimly, "Yeah, take a good look. For the rest of your life you'll be watching kids dancing around garbage—unless you get the damn lead out. Six fights, three win, three lose. And you could've had all six."

He said listlessly, "Juan fight good."

Cole snapped, "You lost before you got into the ring. This fight racket isn't a ball. You gotta work for every damn bout. You don't like training so you go through the motions and get positively nothing out of it. You got to put your heart into every exercise, from shadow-boxing till you finish on the mat. You don't kid anybody when you skip roadwork and goldbrick in the gym. It catches up to you fast. Before you know it you got no second wind to depend on, your muscles balk, your timing just ain't working."

"Juan try, Juan try good."

Cole looked up at the sky. "Maybe it ain't your fault. That's how you're built and I can't change you. If it's like that, you should quit now. You gotta work at it, Juan. Can't you understand that? A good fiddle player, a good painter, anybody that's up there on top of his trade hadda put in apprentice time and practice time and a lot of time he wanted for muzzling around. That's how he got up."

Juan shifted his feet. "Juan no like gym. Work, work, work. Juan like gloves make bang, bang, bang for money."

"*Bang, bang, bang,*" Cole mimicked him. "You didn't do a helluva lot of banging those last two fights."

Juan avoided Cole's eyes. "Juan try to make bang but they bang first. Juan train good. Every day Juan run like crazy man on bridge. Juan swear."

Cole searched his face. "Maybe you did, I don't know. I got an idea that goddam club on Clinton Street ain't doing you any good. You got a place to hang out so you come home at all hours. Don't bother to deny it." He sniffed and his eyes lit up with sudden recognition. "You smoked a reefer tonight."

"Reefer?"

"Don't act so damn innocent. Like burning tea leaves. You think I'm a dummy? New tricks you're learning down that club: how to stay out all kinds of crazy hours, how to lose your dough gambling so you're broke all the time and have to hit me for a loan, how to smoke a loco weed."

Juan felt depressed. A marijuana cigarette gave him a sense of elation, then a reaction would set in and depression and moodiness would sweep over him like a black shadow.

Juan was too fatigued, mentally and physically, to argue Cole's accusations. "*Sí*, Juan smoke. First time. Honest, cross Juan heart." He stared at Cole, expecting an outburst, but none came. Juan had seen Cole lace it into one of his other boxers, a big heavyweight, for taking a couple drags on a cigar. Loud and dirty, shaking a finger, threatening. . . . Now, as he spoke, it seemed as if he were telling Juan not to read the morning paper.

"I told you go down to the Club and rub elbows with the boys. But that's all."

"Manny mad," Juan pleaded, "Manny holler. Juan bad boy."

"What's the use? I guess it's my fault. I encouraged you to set yourself up to temptation. I shoved you right into the damn net."

"Bad boy, bad boy!"

"Nah. You're a good kid—in the wrong racket. Juan, you box on the twenty-second, if the Commission doctor passes you. After that, it's up to you."

Juan's eyes narrowed. "Juan?"

"I don't handle losers, Juan. Financially, a loser is no good to me; he's no good to the rest of my stable, on account if it gives my boys a losing complex; it's no good for you because you'll wind up with birds whistling in your head. Lose your next fight, Juan, and you've had it."

"Juan get fight, plenty fight."

Cole shook his head. "Those matchmakers like winners. Believe me, I had a helluva time getting you this next fight."

Juan's throat was suddenly dry. "Juan win next time. You see. Juan train good, run bridge."

Cole flipped a Chiclet into his mouth, his jaw muscles standing out in ridges as he chewed.

"Sure," he said, without conviction. "You'll train hard and you'll win. Now go on upstairs and get a good night's sleep. *Hasta luego, amigo.*"

Juan went upstairs, his feet dragging on the stairs. He had to win, he had to win, he had to win. *Car-ramba*, he'd show that Señor Cole. He'd come tearing out of his corner, punching until his opponent, bleeding from every pore, fell unconscious.

But suppose he lost?

He stopped on the landing, sick at heart. He had to keep fighting so he could make money. Without money

he'd be a nobody all his life. . . . A smile broke over his face. He chuckled loudly and slapped the railing. He knew how to win!

Race horses given a shot of dope before a run couldn't lose. The trouble came after the race, when the automatic saliva test was given. But a fighter could get a shot before a fight, maybe just a sniff of the white powder would be sufficient, and nobody would know.

He tried to open the door with his key. The door had been locked from the inside. Juan laughed to himself, scratched his head. Papa had threatened to lock him out if he didn't come home before midnight. Always Papa threatening, always Mama talking him out of it. Except this time.

He kicked on the door until the neighbors began to complain, then curled up in the corner of the hallway and fell asleep.

8.

Juan lay on the dressing room table, completely exhausted, while the doctor sutured the gash over his left eye. He felt the first sting of the needle, then his mind wandered, and until the doctor left, he neither saw nor felt. Manny Cole stood over him, a mixture of worry and pity in his eyes.

"They should've stopped it in the first round. Fourteen stitches."

Juan tried to smile. "Juan got plenty stitch all over face."

The effects of the heroin had worn off so quickly, it

was as if he hadn't taken any. Worse, he had felt a little sick before even a punch was thrown. Perhaps if he'd taken a real shot. . . . But how could he with a dressing room full of fighters, managers, Cole. You can't go to the toilet and prepare a syringe full of heroin solution and shoot it into your veins. Too many eyes. Just sniffing the H while sitting on the bowl, away from prying eyes, had been tough enough. . . .

Cole said, "You just ain't got it. We gotta face it. Trying ain't enough. Me, if I tried a million years I could never paint a picture. You gotta have the knack. I guess you gotta be born with it."

Juan touched his lips with his fingers, stared at the blood spots. "Next time Juan win sure thing."

Cole pressed a towel to the cut lip. "No, not next time, not any time. You shot your load, whatever it was, and you're through."

Juan pushed Cole's hand away. "Seven times Juan fight—"

Cole smiled. "See, you count good. Let's not wait until you can't remember worth a damn."

Juan sat up, and the quick action sent a shooting pain through his head. "Juan no quit now."

Softly Cole said, "You got no choice. You took a lot of punishment in your short career. Thank God, you're in one piece. It could've been a lot worse."

"Juan try!" he shouted. "Juan try hard."

Cole snapped, "You said that and I let you off easy!" He took a half turn around the room. "The truth is you didn't try at all, not like you should have. Sure you gave out with everything you had once a fight started. But that's half the story. You didn't try before you got in the ring.

That's what counts most. A kid can cram the night before an exam and get away with it. A good boxer might fake it through if he didn't train. But not you. You needed every hour, every lesson. Every guy you boxed was a bum. I saw to that. I handpicked every one of them. Only he was in condition and you were not and that was the difference in every fight; you were the bum, not him. . . ." Cole's face expressed a shrug. "What's the difference now? Let's just forget the whole thing. Go back to school. It ain't too late."

Juan laughed bitterly and the cut on his lips opened again and he could feel the blood running down to his chin. When Cole tried to wipe it, Juan pushed him away.

"No school."

"Go out and get a job. You'll make more money than in this lousy game and you won't wind up with a scarred face."

Juan stared at him. "What Juan do, work in factory?"

"Where you wanna work, in a bank?"

"Sweep floor in factory, like servant."

"In a bank you could be first vice-president, the guy in charge of sweeping up any loose bills lying on the floor."

Juan shook his head angrily. "You, too, laugh."

Cole sighed. "Laughing at myself. I see a kid dancing around in the street or up in a gym and he looks like the money so I pick him up and sweat with him and spend every dime I got. And all the time he's nothing but a juicy lemon that squirts right in my eye. But I don't give up. Tomorrow, next week, I'll pick up some other amateur and try making a champ out of him. I'm no big-wheel manager with connections. Real pros don't come running

into my stable. So I gotta use amateurs, hungry kids who might make it to the top. That's how it was with you—and the kid before you—and probably with the next bum I pick up."

"Manny, once more let Juan try—"

"I'll help you get dressed."

"No help Juan. Manny—"

"Keep the whole purse for tonight's fight. You'll need it till you grab a job or something."

The sweat ran down Juan's face, into his eyes, smarting. "Juan got job to fight."

"Shut up." The muscles in Cole's face twitched. "You dumb kid, listen to me."

"Juan no listen."

"Then don't. If you need a couple bucks once in a while you know where to find me. I'll be away a couple months. I'm going out to the Coast to look around for my next Champ. When I come back, I'll come up your house to say hello."

Juan shouted. "You come nothing. You no need Juan, Juan no need you, Americano."

Anger twisted Cole's lips. "You back to that Americano cry-baby routine?"

Eyes rolling hotly, Juan spat. "This for Americano dog."

Cole's face blazed with color. "That's telling me off. Okay, Buster." He saluted sharply. "Nice to have known you." He moved to the door, hesitated, all his anger burnt out. Without turning, he said, "If you mean what you said, then rot in your goddam hole. When you cool down and you need me, you'll know where to find me. . . ."

When Cole had gone, Juan stretched out again on the

table, and not until a manager pushed him off to make room for his beaten fighter did he open his eyes. Without showering, he dressed slowly. Mechanically, he began to throw his things into the black valise, his wet strips, the robe, his black leather boxing shoes, the heavy socks, a towel. Suddenly he upended the valise, and when the paraphernalia dropped out, kicked at them, cursing, swearing, tears rolling down his cheeks.

It was almost midnight when Juan found his way into the Panthers Club. For over an hour he'd walked around, not wanting to go home, not like this, beaten, white tape over his eye. Nor had he wished to go down to the Club, but he'd thought most of the boys might be out and, somehow, the Club had a more friendly atmosphere than the Rivera apartment, especially after a fight.

Most of the boys were sitting around the table; Doc and Joe looking at French pictures; Frankie and Cheesy Dorfman playing a two-handed pinochle; Lippy and Artie Dorfman watching.

They looked up as Juan came in. Nobody spoke for a moment, then Frankie said, "Look at the Spik. He sure got a workout."

Juan stood in a semicrouch. "Lousy Spik, bastard Spik."

Artie Dorfman rolled big brown eyes. "Sure is punchy, callin' himself names."

Doc looked up from a postcard. "You lookin' for a shot in the head, Artie?"

Artie sneered, "Who's gonna give it to me, him?"

"Me," Doc said, getting up.

Artie shrugged. "You I got trouble with; him I could take."

Cheesy Dorfman said, "Me or my brudder could take

him good. Hey, Artie, tell 'em about the time you used to bang me around. Now who's the best fighter in the family?"

"The old lady," Artie said. "She's got muscles she ain't never used before."

Frankie's eyes went slowly over Juan's body. "Somebody tell me what the hell's the good of having him in the Club? Who needs him?"

Joe Kusack growled. "You startin' that again? He ain't hurtin' nobody. He was okay when he give you tickets."

Frankie said, "You know what I done with the tickets he gimme for tonight? I crapped on 'em and down the toilet they went."

Through clenched teeth, Juan said, "No-good Frankie, Juan kill you dead."

Doc said, "Juan, do me a favor, go sit in the corner. We got business to figure out."

Joe said, "Yeh. And don't be so cocky. Frankie ain't all wrong, you know. Once, a long time ago this used to be a social club. No more. We're strictly business now. Everybody, Debs, Juniors, they all work. And they're all makin' a buck."

Doc said, "Lay off him, Joe. It's his business what he does."

"Sure," Frankie said. "Only one a these days Yussel Wacks is gonna blow him out the door. You, me, nobody, is gonna stop him."

"I'll worry about it," Doc said. "Go on, *amigo*, grab a snooze."

Frankie said, "He'll stink up the cot."

A fierce ache in his heart, head bowed, Juan went into the kitchen, closed the door behind him. His hand shook

as he lit a cigarette in the darkness and sat down on the edge of the cot. Eighteen years old and his hand trembled like his Uncle Alfredo's. Frankie dog! The others too. Dogs! Yes, even Doc. Every one of them dogs.

He shoved the cigarette under a shoe, stepped on it, stretched out on the cot, and slowly the turmoil inside him died down and soon his eyes closed and he heard somebody snoring. He came awake, listening. He laughed. It was his own snoring he'd heard. Many times, just before dropping off into a deep sleep, he had heard himself snore. Papa didn't believe that. How could one hear himself snore if one was asleep?

He closed his eyes and in a moment was fast asleep.

"Anybody around?" a voice called from somewhere.

He sat up on the cot, looked around him for a few seconds before he realized he was in the kitchen of the Panthers Club.

"Nobody here?" The voice was female, familiar, and, for some vague reason he couldn't understand, electrifying.

He got up and when he opened the door Sade stood in the dim light of the table lamp, near the couch. He stared at her gray cotton skirt, tight against the thick buttocks, the fat calves which made the ankles seem thin and weak, and when she half turned he could see the sharp V of the white cotton blouse.

Blond like his Nancy, but not nearly as beautiful, no, never. Where was Nancy now? How long ago had it been? Not even a year! *Dios!* Who could believe it? It seemed so long ago, all those months of training, all those fights. Nancy, what did they do to you! And I, your Juan, what did I do to you!

He began to tremble. Frankie, dirty dog!

Sade's head came around quickly, gasped. "Where'd you come from? Couldn't you talk 'stead of just standing there? You gimme the creeps."

Juan bowed. With a jauntiness he was far from feeling, "Forgive, please, *señorita.* So beautiful you look, Juan no could say something."

"You always did gimme the creeps, the way you look at me."

He came into the room. "How Juan look, *señorita?*"

"I don't know. I just don't like it." She sat down on the couch, her eyes never leaving his face. "If I ever told Joe . . ." She brushed back a lock of hair. "He wouldn't like it."

"Why?"

"What you mean why? I'm his girl, you know that."

Juan laughed. "You Frankie's girl."

She looked frightened. "Don't say such things."

He ran a finger across her cheek and he could feel a muscle twitch. "You, me, Frankie, we know."

"You're a damn liar." And as an afterthought, "Keep your hands to yourself."

"Once Juan see Frankie, him and you," he jerked a thumb in the direction of the kitchen, "in there."

The color left her face. "You damn Spik. Spying on me. So Frankie and I were in that kitchen. So we were talking something private. You got a filthy mind."

He nodded, clucking his tongue. "*Sí.* Dirty Spik mind. Filthy. Juan listen by kitchen door." He imitated her voice. " 'I love you, Frankie, darling, honey, doll.' You make sounds like calf. 'Easy, lover, easy. Ah, Frankie honey bunch.' " He spat dryly. "You Frankie's girl long

time. Juan got eyes. Joe, him dopey Polack. Frankie go out. Five minutes later, you go for walk. Joe, him play cards."

She stared up at him, a dry tongue running over dry lips. "Joe'll never believe you, never in a hundred years."

Contempt twisted his lips. "Juan tell Joe nothin'. You Juan tell, not Joe. You Frankie's girl." He could feel his pulses pounding and throbbing. "Right?"

She hesitated a second. "All right, so I'm Frankie's girl. What difference does it make? It never was Joe. Always Frankie. And I'd tell it to Joe in a minute, but Frankie is a nice guy. He doesn't want trouble. Not that he's scared of that dumb Polack. Frankie just doesn't want the Club split up on account of a fight. It wouldn't look right, Frankie taking Joe's girl. I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

"Juan ask," he said easily, "so you tell lover boy."

"Lover boy? You?" She laughed harshly. "You might be a hotshot with your Spik girl friends, but to me you're just the guy on the other end of the ten-foot pole."

He smiled. "Once Juan got girl. Nancy. So beautiful like flowers and sweet like sugar cane. Juan love Nancy like something." The memory came up in his throat, tight and dry. "You know what Frankie do to my Nancy?"

She pressed her palms against her knees. "You got no proof it was Frankie."

"Frankie done bad to my Nancy. Frankie dirty my Nancy."

She threw her head as if moving away after a slap. "Maybe he dirtied himself. She was only a Spik."

He reached out, grasped her arm. A twist of his wrist

and she was flat against him, her breasts soft against his chest.

He said, bitterly, "Juan make you dirty too. Then you, Frankie, both be dirty."

Gray eyes wide, breathing raggedly, she said, "You wouldn't dare. Frankie would kill you."

"Juan's girl for Frankie's girl."

"I'm worth ten of your girls."

"Juan find out."

He pulled her head close and kissed her so hard, her teeth clicked against his. He could feel the burning cut on his lips opening; the blood tasted salty.

A rape for a rape. Sade for Nancy. Then Sade could tell Frankie what he had done. He wanted her to go running to Frankie, yelling, hysterical. He did it, Frankie, Juan did it. Like you did to Nancy. How does it feel, Frankie? What do you say, Frankie? Dog Frankie . . .

She pulled away, struck him with an open hand, then with a clenched fist, and he thought: Had Nancy fought like this? The odds had been greater then. Six against one. Six big youths against one frail girl.

The anger was bitter in his mouth as he pushed her toward the open kitchen door. And when she fell, and began to crawl toward the street door, moaning and pleading, he permitted her to reach the door, then grasped a handful of hair and dragged her across the floor, kicking and crying. Once she screamed and he stopped to slap her face, and she looked up at him and it perplexed him when he saw no anger in her eyes, just reproach.

"Now you be Juan's girl," he said, pulling her into the kitchen, closing the door.

He began to undress and she watched him from where she crouched on the floor. A twist of his left arm and the metal snaps opened on his shorts and he stood there, brown and naked, his chest rising and falling gently, and when she didn't move he grasped her under the arm pits, flung her across the cot. His belly muscles were tight with anticipation and his loins were tense under his fingers. He reached over to grab the blouse by the V so he could rip it from her body.

She slapped his hand away. "You'll tear it."

There was an odd sound to her voice Juan couldn't fathom.

He said, "Juan take off clothes."

There was a slight quiver of excitement in her voice. "I don't need any help from you, thank you."

He stared bewildered as she unbuttoned her blouse, dropped it at the foot of the cot.

He cried, "Tell Frankie, tell Frankie what Juan do."

She slipped the skirt off her legs and she was naked. "Let's not worry about Frankie," she said.

"No, no," he cried. "Tell, tell."

"If he comes in on us now, him or the Polack, I'll holler plenty. Even if they kill you, I'll holler rape. If nobody comes . . ." Her face was flushed, eyes moist. "Love me, Juan, love me good."

He backed away, shaking his head. She didn't understand. This wasn't what he wanted.

"Tell!" he shouted. "Juan want you tell Frankie!"

"He'll kill you. That Frankie's got a temper. What you waiting for, Juan? C'mon, you lover boy . . . Juan!"

He swept up his clothes, ran out of the room. In the

main clubroom, he dressed quickly. He could hear her swearing, cursing him, threatening.

"Dirty Spik," she was crying. "Lousy, dirty Spik. Get killed."

He ran out of the Club, out into the street. Sitting on a narrow bench in front of a candy store, a Puerto Rican boy was serenading his girl. He played a guitar and sang Spanish songs while she stared at him with starry eyes.

A woman yelled down from the third floor. "Ain't you lousy Spiks got a home? Why don't y'go back to Puerto Rico where you belong!"

Juan lifted his face in the direction of the voice, unburdening himself quickly and explosively, then ran all the way home, bitter gall in his mouth.

9.

DECEMBER was cold. It snowed and no sooner was the snow cleared away, when it snowed again. And then one day the sun came out but the cold north wind remained.

It was late Saturday afternoon, just after Christmas, a wet dismal day. Juan hurried up the stairs, his shoulders hunched, hands deep in his pockets. With his key he opened the door to the Rivera apartment, went inside and flicked on the light.

"Mamita?" His hand shook as he rubbed his belly muscles. The pain was driving him crazy. It was quiet in the house now that his relatives had found their own apartment. Soon it would be noisy again. In a few days another

aunt and uncle and their six young children were due in New York.

He scratched his neck, his face. He knew the symptoms; he needed a pop, then he could ride high again. The full-length mirror reflected his image. He stared. How he had changed! The face, no longer round and boyish, was now long and thin, and the cheeks had fallen in as with a man without teeth. His complexion had changed from brown to yellow, and his clothes hung on him as if he'd lost a lot of weight.

Fool! While you stand here, the pain in your belly gets worse. Soon it starts in your back, like a knife digging.

He looked quickly around the house. The radio was gone; he'd taken that the last time. And Mamita's watch, the one Papa had given her to wear on her blouse, that too was in the pawnshop.

He hurried into Papa's bedroom, yanked open the closet door, pawed through the clothing hanging on the rack. Papa's new suit, where was it? Papa had paid twenty-one American dollars for it down at the Bowery Mart. Papa had worn it only once so surely the suit should bring five dollars.

No suit. He flung garments off the hangers. Perhaps Papa had it under an old jacket or a coat. The suit was not in the closet. He leaned against the door, squeezed his belly with both hands. The pain was sickening. Panting, he looked around the room. Had Papa worn the suit to work? No. Papa wouldn't wear good clothes up in Klinsky's Tailor Shop when he worked on the pressing machine.

Then he saw Mamita's dress, the beautiful red and white and black beaded gown that came down to her ankles.

Mama loved the dress, which she had worn for the first time at the wedding of his cousin Felicia and Pancho, a third cousin. Sixteen dollars the dress had cost and to Juan it was the most gorgeous dress in the world. He could not take the dress, not Mama's beautiful dress.

He stepped away from the closet and his legs wobbled under him. He saw the shoe box, pulled it out from under the dresser, ripped off the cover. Papa's tan shoes, shiny new, stared up at him. What could he get for a three-dollar pair of new shoes? Breathing heavily, he went out into the kitchen, found a shopping bag. Back in the bedroom, he slipped the shoes into the paper bag. The shoes weren't enough. He needed something else. He touched the three-piece comb, brush and mirror set on the dresser. Perhaps he could get fifty cents for them. A dollar for the shoes, fifty cents for the set. More, more. For a dollar fifty he could get nothing but a sugared dose of the white powder. You got what you paid for. . . .

Some of the sourness crept up into his mouth and he gagged. Soon the pain would be unbearable. He pulled Mama's dress off the hanger, stuffed it into the bag. Some day, he swore, he would buy Mama a hundred dresses as beautiful as this one.

Just this once he would buy a fix, then he would shake off the habit and never again go near Lippy. Never! Right now he was taking one fix every three days. If he did not stop, the habit would get worse. That he knew. Lippy himself spent twenty dollars a day on the white powder. Lippy's girl, Carole, needed fifteen dollars' worth a day, and she bought the stuff at cost from Lippy. Carole had steady men customers who paid five dollars every time they went up to see her in her flat on Rivington Street.

Lippy sent her customers, too, and Lippy only took one third of her earnings instead of the usual fifty per cent.

The bag under his arm, Juan pulled open the hall door. Outside, he hesitated a brief second, remembering to leave the door open. Like the last time, Papa would think the house had been burglarized. He turned to run down the hall, gasped. The tall, blackly outlined figure of Papa stood on the landing, watching him. Juan rushed back into the house, flung the shopping bag across the room and when it landed on the table, he pushed it off, between the table and the wall.

Papa came in, closed the door. They stared at each other and there was an odd look in Papa's eyes and Juan knew he had guessed.

Panting, Juan said in Spanish, "The suit looks very good on you, Papa."

Papa's little mustache twitched. "The package," he said, "What have you done with the package you had under your arm?"

"Package?" Juan shook his head. "You are mistaken, my father. I had no package."

As if he could see through wood, Papa took two giant steps, pushed the table aside, picked up the bag, and Papa's hands trembled as he opened the bag and took out the gown and the shoes. He stared down at the table where he'd placed them, a look of horror on his face.

Juan clutched his belly with both hands, trying desperately to smile, knowing he was unsuccessful. "Now who could have put Mama's gown and your shoes into that bag?"

There was grief in Papa's eyes. "The same thief who stole Mamita's watch and the radio. The same thief who has

taken dollars out of my pocket while I slept. The same thief who stole money from his aunt and uncle, from his mother. You, my son, you are the thief."

Juan shook his head. "Father, how can you say such things about your son? It is not true."

Papa reached out suddenly, grasped Juan's left arm, pushed up the coat and shirt sleeves as far as they would go. Juan squirmed, but Papa had a strong grip. Pointing to the broken skin, he cried, "This, my son, this too is not true?" He flung the arm away from him, tears in his eyes. "My son, stealing his little mother's dress."

Juan covered his face with trembling hands. "I am sorry, Father. I had to have money. I asked you to give me money—"

"And I gave you."

"It was not enough. I needed more and more."

He'd worked for a while in the skirt-manufacturing plant on East Broadway. Then he'd been sick and lost his job. He had driven a truck for the egg man on Cherry Street until the owner had caught him in the bathroom with a syringe in his hand. And then the cigar store on Allen Street and the hardware store and the fruit market. . . . Juan had been sick too much and they had fired him. After a while he had not looked for work, for he did not care.

Papa said, "Look at yourself! Thin like a scarecrow. You don't eat, you don't sleep—"

Doubling over with the pain, he blurted, "Help me, Father, please help me!"

Papa came quickly to his side. "We will go to the police. They will help."

"No, no, no police."

"They will get a doctor for you."

"The police will arrest me, and put me in a prison where I will die."

"No, my son. The police know of a place where they can send you to be cured."

"Where I will die."

Down in Lexington, Kentucky, there was a hospital where drug addicts were sent for a cure, but most of the patients died a horrible death. Those who did not die came back to the neighborhood, back to the habit, for nobody was ever cured. That was what he had been told by Lippy and the man who sold Lippy the cellophane packs.

He told it to Papa. "That is what I have heard."

Papa shook his head. "Lies, my son, lies. Many have been cured, never to return to the devil. And when you are rid of it, we will go back to San Juan. You do not like this country. Many times you have said you wish we could return to Puerto Rico. There is nothing for us here. We never should have come."

"Yes, yes!" Juan cried. "We will go back."

"After you are rid of the devil."

"No, no, now."

"It will take time. I have no money for transportation."

"Now, now!"

"Tomorrow, I will visit our friends and relatives. I will get the money somehow."

"Now! Now!"

"You are ill. I will call a doctor."

"The doctor will call the police. Father, give me money. I know where I can get the white powder. Then I will not be sick any more. Tomorrow we can borrow the money and go home."

"No more white powder!" Papa cried. "I will call the police."

His shriek filled the room. "No!"

"It is best. Remain here until I return."

"No, Papa, no." He turned, raced out of the house, down the stairs, cut into the street. By the time he reached the corner every step was torture. He stood there on the wet, desolate street, sweat running down his face. Where? Lippy, of course. He had to get to Lippy Valentine.

10.

Juan was sick with nausea when he burst into the clubroom. Doc was dancing with Dolly, Frankie with Sade. The radio was loud, the mambo music which he usually liked, nothing but noise. Lippy, dancing with an imaginary partner, stopped to look at Juan.

"You wanna dance with me?"

Joe Kusack looked up from where he sat on the couch. "Hey, look a him, he's sure got it bad."

Lippy had a wise look in his squinty eyes. "Looks like he crapped in his pants. If he didn't, he sure will soon."

"Lippy," Juan pleaded with outstretched hands, "Juan talk to you."

Lippy said, "You got cash, we talk."

The music stopped for a moment. The dancing couples broke, and Doc came over.

Frankie yelled, "Lip, I'm gonna break your goddam asshole! How many times I gotta tell you this ain't a pad? Suppose a cop followed him?"

"No cop." Juan wiped sweat from his face. "Nobody follow."

Frankie said, "Outside, get the hell outside. You too, Lip."

Lippy said, "I ain't doin' business with him, why do I have to go outside?"

Doc said, "Give him a fix."

Lippy said, "You got dough, Spik?"

"I pay tomorrow."

"I ain't a social worker."

"Somebody help me. I die."

There was hate in Sade's eyes. "Go outside and die."

Doc yelled, "I said give him a deck."

Lippy jabbed with his left fist, slapped his left arm with his right hand. "This I'll give him. You think I steal the stuff?"

Every muscle in his face distended in anger, Doc cried, "I'm payin', you no-good bastard!" He flung a crumpled bill on the floor. "I don't want anything free from you."

Pouting, Lippy picked up the money. "You don't have t'holler. C'mon, Spik, in the kitchen."

Frankie said, "Outside."

"Where?" Joe Kusack laughed. "In the gutter? He can't make it outside the door. Let 'em get it over with so he can get the hell out a here."

"No," Frankie said. They stood there, Joe and Frankie, glaring at each other.

Frankie spoke first. "From now on, Spik, I don't want you coming down to the Club. You understand? What the hell you waiting for, Lip? Give him his goddam shot and chase him."

In the kitchen it took Lippy moments to prepare the

solution and, his breath coming out in ragged spurts, Juan watched every move, hurrying Lippy with an occasional Spanish swear word. Laughing, Lippy wiped the hypodermic needle on his trousers.

"Don't wanna give you a shot from a dirty needle," he chuckled.

"Give, give," Juan panted. "No-good dog, give."

He watched the solution being sucked into the syringe. Only then did he remove his coat and push up his sleeve. Lippy held the syringe over his head.

"Say please," he said.

Juan took a step toward him. "*Diablo perro!* Juan kill you dead."

Lippy handed him the syringe. "Break it and you'll pay for it."

Juan's hand trembled as he pushed the needle into his skin, into a vein. He pulled it out a little, enjoying the agonizing moments of waiting. When he couldn't stand it any more, he pushed down the plunger slowly.

He sat on the cot while the pain was drawn out of his belly and the nausea was dissolved into a pleasant sense of well-being. His blood began to race faster and faster and he could feel his face flush. As if it had never happened, the agony and sickness were gone and he was whole again.

Lippy wrapped the syringe in a wad of cotton, then placed it in a paper bag. Hesitating, he watched Juan out of the corner of his eye, and when he thought Juan wasn't looking, hid the package behind the stove.

Lippy said, "Next time bring money or you'll get balls," and went outside, closing the door.

With his fingers, Juan wiped the spot of blood from his

arm. How long would this shot last? Another three days? Two days? Perhaps one day? If the H hadn't been mixed with sugar it should last three days, but he knew Lippy always cut the white powder as fine as he could get away with. Once Lippy had boasted how he'd given a girl nothing but sugar and she'd nearly gone crazy, believing that she had reached the maximum of her consumption and from now on, no matter how much heroin she used, it would not ease her pain. The only relief after that would be death.

He heard voices as he got up and rolled down his sleeve. His coat in his hand, he opened the kitchen door. Yussel Wacks was standing in the circle of light cast by the bridge lamp. Big Mac, Yussel's bodyguard, was at his usual place at the door. Doc, Joe, Frankie and Lippy sat at the table, their full attention on Yuss. The girls had gone.

"Four guys," Yuss was saying, "who can drive a car. A couple hours work and you get a sawbuck each."

Doc said, "You haven't told us what the job is."

Frankie had admiration in his eyes as he looked up at Yuss. "A job's a job, right, Yuss?"

Yuss stared at Doc. "Doc always likes to play it safe. For that I give him credit. Some day, I'll give him something else. It's not a job, it's a picnic. You take a nice easy ride out to Long Island with four or five passengers. I got four cars lined up on Eighth Avenue, between Forty-third and Fiftieth streets. One of my boys will steer men and women to your car. When you're loaded, my man will tell you where to go. Easy as pie."

Doc smiled. "Suckers."

Yuss pointed a finger at him. "You cut that out. I run a

legit gambling place. You boys understand what I want? My steerers bring you customers around eleven-thirty, show-break. You take them out to the game and collect ten bucks. This is just for a while. Four of my regular chauffeurs got jammed up and I can't bail 'em out before tomorrow. But you boys play it right and there might be regular jobs soon as there's openings."

Frankie said, "Is it okay if we invest twenty bucks?"

Yuss laughed. "Make it twenty-one, a buck for the house and you got one bet. You boys got operator's or chauffeur's licenses?"

"I got a operator's," Frankie said.

"Me too," Joe said.

Lippy said, "I always carry a operator's. You think I wanna get in trouble?"

Yuss said, "Doc?"

Doc sighed. "I never did get to learn to drive."

Yussel snapped his fingers. "Hell! Where are the other kids? I gotta have one more driver."

Frankie shrugged. "Shlemie drives. And the Dorfman brothers."

"Where are they?"

"How should I know?"

Juan stepped into the light. "Juan drive car."

Yuss's head came around stiffly. Thin lips barely moving, he said, "Where'd you come from?"

Doc said, "He can use ten bucks. He takes my place and you got four chauffeurs."

Yuss's sallow face expressed doubt. "I don't like outsiders."

Juan stared at Lippy. Next time bring money, the dog had said. No money, no white powder. And when you

need the white powder again, you'll steal Mamita's gown, Papa's shoes. . . .

"Juan is Panther," Juan said, looking around at the others, each in turn, pleading. "Tell Yuss Juan Panther."

Frankie said, "Why don't we wait, maybe Shlemie'll be along soon. This guy is a Panther for one job, then he fades."

"No!" Juan cried. "Juan Panther all time from now."

Lippy smiled. "It's okay by me."

Doc nodded. "*Amigo's* a Panther."

Joe grunted. "Second the motion."

Frankie shrugged. "You don't wanna wait for Shlemie? Okay, Rivera, tomorrow you get the cockamamie on your arm. Yuss, he's one of us."

II.

Juan had a dream that Mama had failed to clean the bed with kerosene, her usual weekly job in the hot summer months, and as he slept two bedbugs crawled between his toes, then the two became four and each of the four split into two to become eight. He tried to sit up in bed so he could brush them away but heavy weights on his stomach kept his body straight and stiff.

Now his legs were completely covered and the insects ran up his thighs, into his hair, swarming over his belly. He moved, slapped at them but the rusty wave rolled up to his neck, over his face, into his ears. He screamed as they crawled into his mouth.

Someone was shaking him. "You'll wake up the neighborhood. Take it easy."

Juan opened his eyes and he was sitting against the wall near the window of the Delancey Street flat. Doc was bending over him and Joe Kusack stood a few feet away, his mouth twisted in derision.

Joe said, "Let him holler. Maybe Big Mac's gorillas'll get scared and beat it. Then we can go out and eat. What I wouldn't give for a lousy sandwich."

Juan pulled up his trousers, scratched his legs, suddenly shifted his nails to his chest where the itching was worse.

Doc said, "You got any more H decks left? You didn't take the last one during the night?"

Joe grunted. "He had a midnight snack, now he's got one fix left. We ain't got enough headaches, we gotta worry about this hop-hound."

Juan cried out, rolled over the floor, his body twitching as he raked his chest with his fingernails.

"Cut it out," Doc said. "You're bleeding like a pig."

Joe Kusack went through Juan's pockets, found the cellophane envelope. "Okay, I got it, the last of the Mohicans. Once this is gone, he'll tear the walls down."

"We'll worry about it then," Doc said. "He's throwin' up again."

Joe sniffed. "He didn't make it to the toilet this time neither. Hey, he broke the needle. How'd he take the shot last night?"

"How should I know? But he sure's got a big hole in his arm. He must've got himself an eye dropper."

Joe cried, "If he used the dropper I got for my ear medicine, I'll murder the bastard!"

Juan's face muscles twitched, drops of sweat running down his face. He gasped, "Home Juan got five, six needles. Maybe ten fix."

Joe said, slapping his thigh in disgust, "Why don't you go get 'em? How you like that crazy Spik? What'd you use last night for your shot?"

"Drop," Juan said. "In kitchen."

"I'll kill him!" Joe cried. "Spoiling my dropper."

Doc said, "You got nothing else to worry about? A lousy dropper. What you gonna do, take it with you when Big Mac's gang knocks you off? Get the dropper while I make up the fix."

Joe Kusack spat on the floor. Dumb Spik, he thought. Cabbagehead. I warned the donkey not to play round with those bennies Lippy got off that phoney druggist. Lousy goof balls in beer to hop him up, yellowjackets and redbirds, nice and pretty and loaded with dynamite. Then those goddam loco weeds. I didn't tell the dumb bastard he was stupid? Onionhead! Marijuana, just one step away from the white stuff, one lousy step.

Doc cried, "For God's sake, Joe, don't just stand there. He's dying. You ever spend a couple days with a stiff?"

"They stink," Joe said, "and so does he, dead or alive."

Doc got up. "I can't keep his hands away from his body, he's strong as an ox. He'll bleed to death. Gimme the stuff, I'll fix it."

In a few minutes, Doc was back, the dropper full of the colorless solution. Kneeling, Joe held Juan's arms, leaned on his body to keep it still.

"C'mon, c'mon," Joe cried. "He's slippery like a fish."

Doc pressed the mouth of the eye dropper against a vein, pressed. "You got to screw this in," he said, "to break the skin."

"Use the old hole," Joe said, "and hurry it up. That

glass is so big you're liable to cut a vein in half and he'll die like a brown pig."

"Shut up," Doc cried, "and hold his arm!"

Blood spurted out of the skin, covered the mouth of the dropper. Doc pressed harder, turning.

"Give it t'him," Joe said. "He's strong as a bull."

Doc squeezed the rubber nipple, watched in dismay as most of the solution oozed out, a solution of water, heroin and blood.

Joe grunted. "That won't last long. You dummied it, all right."

"Maybe you could do better?"

"Okay, okay." He rolled off Juan, pushed himself up. "It'll last a while. What's today? Sunday. Nine in the morning. Maybe it'll get him through till tonight. Then . . ."

He took the eye dropper from Doc, went into the kitchen to wash it. The Spik wouldn't need it any more, less he wanted to shoot sink water into his veins. He leaned over the sink, took the waterspout into his mouth, drank until he felt bloated, then shut the faucet. When he returned to the living room Juan's eyes were bright and the bravado was back.

Juan said, "Give Juan cigarette."

Doc said, "We ran out of cigarettes last night, remember?"

Joe said, "No cigarettes, no food, no fixes. Maybe we oughtta jump out the window."

Juan said, "Why we don't fight Mac's dogs? Juan himself kill two with bare hands."

Joe sneered, "With your mouth. A couple minutes ago you was dyin'. Now you're killin'."

Juan laughed. "Juan better Superman."

"Prove it," Joe said. "Jump out the window and bounce back on y'rubber head. A lousy steak, a little one—just a bite."

Doc laughed. "I'd settle for a soup sandwich."

Joe turned on him. "Don't be so goddam smart."

"I was kidding."

"Soup sandwich—" Joe smiled. "Remember the time Yuss sent me for a soup sandwich? Funny, not for that soup sandwich, maybe I wouldn't never be a Panther and if I wasn't never a Panther, I'd never be in this goddam jam."

He turned and walked into the bedroom, closed the door softly behind him. If only he hadn't been a Panther; but how can you be smart and know what's coming? Soup sandwich . . . Doc knew the story. And Doc had been laughing at him.

PART THREE

Joe

I.

Wise-guy Doc. Where'd he get off laughing at Joe? Him and that Spik. Joe didn't like people laughing at him. Always laughing, ever since he'd been a kid in knee pants. Lousy punk kids laughing. He'd get mad and bang 'em around, only you can't fight the whole goddam block 'cause they'd gang up on you and knock you down and kick your balls off, and the sick pain made you puke like a bastard.

If it hadn't been for his old man lousing Joe up, things would've been different, but the guys laughed at Pop so they had to laugh at Joe, too. It figured a guy was big as his family. Take Frankie. He was big because his brother had been big. For knocking off a cop Frankie's brother had been the biggest guy on the block, so Frankie had become a big wheel too. Frankie had been only twelve when his brother got the shot of juice up in the Death House and that was when Frankie took over the gang. Nobody said anything. They didn't have to. Frankie talked and everybody listened.

Me, I got a lousy drunk for an old man so I'm a punk.

Pop made his own drink, raisins and prunes and stuff like that, and he drank the poison right out of the half-gallon jug until he couldn't lift it, then he went out in the street, falling all over himself

And everybody laughed at Joe's old man and then they laughed at Joe Kusack, the drunk Polack's son.

Lots of times his old man had been mugged and rolled for his dough. What'd Pop expect, staggering round like that. He'd come home, all banged up, his pockets ripped out and Mom would patch him up for the next time.

One time the gang rolled Pop—Joe's friends, Frankie and Shlemie and Lippy and the Dorfman brothers, the guys he hung out with. Doc was one of the bunch, only he didn't come around so much. Doc's old man was a tough bastard, always watching the gang like they were going to steal something. Maybe they were, but he was no cop, and the gang wasn't going to steal from him, so what was it his business?

They rolled Joe's old man on Allen Street.

Joe was coming around Rivington and into Allen and it was kind of dark when he saw Frankie grab this drunk from behind. The guy didn't hold still so Frankie belted him right into the wet gutter. The guys bent over the geek and started ripping his pockets. Joe came running real hard. That lousy Frankie was supposed to wait for Joe to go bumming and here he was pulling a job without him. Joe had never been on a real job with Frankie before because Joe wasn't a real Panther. Sure Joe hung around, like Doc, but the fellers didn't want to take Joe into the Club.

On account of his drunk old man Joe was a joke and

the gang didn't want jokes in the Club, only real guys. Joe figured some day they'd take him in, some day when he could prove he could do jobs like bumming and lead-piping same as the others.

So Joe ran to help the gang. Frankie was getting up from where the guy was stretched out, change falling over the gutter.

Joe cried, "I'll get it, Frankie-boy."

Joe picked up a quarter and a dime and all of a sudden the drunk sat up and Joe was looking in his old man's bloody face. Frankie and the gang were running like crazy, turning into Delancey Street. Joe wanted to run, too, but it was his old man in the gutter and Joe was so sick inside he couldn't run two steps. Joe helped him up and Pop leaned on him.

Joe said, "Pop, you okay, huh, Pop, they didn't hurt you?"

He didn't know where they'd come from but he had tears in his mouth and they were so damn salty.

Pop looked down on Joe like he didn't know him. He said, "Nobody hurt Big Polack. You please sit me in park? I be all right, you betcha. Joe, this is you, no? You don't tell Momma. Like a good boy."

Joe never did argue with his old man. Pop had big hands and he hit like a mule. So Joe sat Pop down in the park and people were looking and laughing and Joe got all choked up. One guy said something about Pop drinking too much. Joe gave him a mouthful right in the eye and ran.

All the way to Heshie's candy store on Delancey Street Joe burned at his old man. On account of Pop, Joe'd lost a chance to make the Panthers. If he'd only been another

drunk and Joe'd showed Frankie how he could work with the gang, maybe Frankie'd change his mind and let Joe join up.

Then Joe saw Frankie and Shlemie in Heshie's and it wasn't Pop he was sore on. He saw Frankie eating candy and Shlemie working on a hunk of halvah in one hand and an eight-cent glass of chocolate soda in the other and Joe walked right in and belted Frankie in the head so hard he went into the marble counter and knocked off two jars of fruit syrup. Heshie started to tear his few hairs.

Joe turned on Shlemie who spit out the halvah. Shlemie said, "We didn't know the geek was your old man."

"When'd you find out, just now?"

Joe could tell by the way Shlemie was looking to run, he'd known all the time. Shlemie took a half dollar out of his pocket, held it out.

"Halfee-halfee," he said. "I don't mind splittin' my buck even if I done the dirty work."

Joe took the half dollar with his left hand, belted Shlemie with his right. Another fruit jar crashed to the floor. Heshie screamed with anger. Joe didn't see Frankie. He felt a scratch on his face, like a dozen mosquitoes digging and he looked down on his shirt and the blood was plopping big red quarters, and he just kept looking like it was somebody else who got shanked.

An old lady started to holler her guts out and Swan, the cop on the beat, came running.

It wasn't a big cut. Frankie hardly got the blade in. Frankie was good on that kind of stuff. He held the tip of the blade with two fingers, a quarter inch hunk of steel, and this made a neat cut. The rip was an inch and a half

long, almost under the ear where you could hardly see the six stitches.

The cops asked a lot of dumb questions. What the hell, did they think Joe was gonna rat on Frankie or anybody else? And that Frankie, he was bigger'n ever. Cutting a guy does that for you. Now he didn't even need his brother's rep. He had his own. Sneaky Frankie Davis.

Joe should have given it back to him, from ear to ear, only if he was ever going to be a Panther, he had to just laugh it off. No matter what, he wanted to get into the Club because in Joe's neighborhood you didn't belong to a gang you were nobody.

Joe was fourteen when his old man died. A cop came knocking on the door, Joe opened it and ducked under a bed, figuring brass buttons was looking for him because he'd busted the tailor's window when he'd hollered on Joe for playing ball. Joe heard the cop tell Mom how Pop had been taken to the Alcoholic Ward in Bellevue Hospital. By the time Joe and Mom got there on that creepy First Avenue bus, Pop was a goner and Joe a half orphan.

At the wake in Vanella's Funeral Parlor the whole neighborhood was there, and a guy from Local 1011 of the Brotherhood of Painters and Decorators and Joe's aunt and uncle from the Vladek Houses. Joe sat in the corner, not wanting to look at his old man. Mom kept telling him, go look, you won't see him again, go look. Joe didn't move, not that he was scared—he had guts, plenty guts—he just didn't want to look and nobody could make him.

When Joe got home and into bed Pop came and stood by the bed and Joe covered his head with the blanket and

told Pop to go away. Joe lay there and cried like a kid. He didn't know why, he just had a pain in his chest and he had to cry. Maybe it was because he was glad Pop was dead. Why else would a hard guy like Joe give out with the tears? He was tickled silly.

Now Pop ain't gonna be rollin' around drunk no more and he ain't gonna be gettin' mugged and banged up and people ain't gonna be laughin' at him . . . an' me.

So Joe's old man was dead and buried and things moved around like nothing had happened, except that Mom had to go to work in a sewing-machine place on East Broadway, and sometimes she brought home a dress or a skirt which she got wholesale, and sold it to the neighbors for a buck or so extra.

Joe told her, "Mom, they learn you nothin' in Catholic High. Those brothers, all they know is to bang you over the knuckles with a stick. So why can't I quit and get a job?"

Mom didn't like that. She was old and gray and tired-looking all the time. Ever since Joe could remember Mom was old and gray and tired-looking.

Mom said, "You listen to the brothers. They want you to grow up full of learnin'. If you minded them, they wouldn't have to hit you. Some day you'll get out of high school and go to college and I'll be proud of my son."

Joe could have died laughing. College?

Mom soon found out Joe wasn't headed for college. Brother Donahue started it, always picking on Joe, calling him names just because Joe had dipped chalk into the ink and wrote on a desk. You'd think it was Brother Donahue's desk the way he called Joe puddinhead.

The kids laughed like anything. Joe was fifteen now, a

big guy with muscles. The laughing hurt, and Brother Donahue kept calling him more names, and the kids couldn't stop laughing. Brother Donahue was tall and thin, like a toothpick, a guy Joe knew he could bust in two. Brother Donahue took the pointer and jabbed Joe in the arm. Joe stepped back. The pointer jabbed him in the belly, so Joe slapped it out of Brother Donahue's hand. Brother Donahue reached out to grab Joe so he could bang him around the ears like he always did.

Joe didn't remember what happened next but all of a sudden Brother Donahue was spitting blood all over the place and Joe's knuckles were cut where they'd connected with big buck teeth.

Brother Burns, the head guy in Catholic High sent for Mom. You don't just get heaved out of High without your old lady eating her heart out first. Brother Burns told Mom Joe'd belted Brother Donahue, knocking out two good teeth, loosening two others, only Brother Burns didn't tell the whole story, not from the beginning.

Joe straightened Mom out. "Brother Donahue started it, Mom, stickin' that pointer into my belly like I was a pig, makin' fun so the whole class laughed."

But Mom was on their side. That was the way it always had been. When the neighbors had come running with their goddam stories of how Joe'd busted their kids, Mom'd always been on their side, not listening to Joe's side of the story.

Now Mom's eyes were full of tears. "What'm I going to do with you, Joe?"

Brother Burns had an idea. "I have a suggestion. It's for the boy's own good. This isn't the first time he's displayed sadistic tendencies, Mrs. Kusack. He's picked fights with

other boys, then taken a brutal delight in beating them up."

Joe cried, "I just evened things up, that's all. You wasn't around the times they used to kick me around when I was a kid in St. Joseph's school. Now it's my turn."

Brother Burns wasn't even listening to Joe. He said to Mom, "I'd suggest psychiatric treatment for the boy, for his own good. Let's find out why he does these crazy—foolish things."

Mom shook her head, scared. "No! No, Joe don't need a head doctor."

Joe could have bust out laughing. Grandpa Kusack once got ten days in Bellevue for observation. That was all, brother! The next stop was the bughouse up in Rockland and that was where Grandpa Kusack kicked off.

Lots of times he'd heard Mom say, "Joe is like his grandpa—wild, crazy wild."

Joe knew that wasn't so. Mom didn't understand. Brother Burns neither. You couldn't explain some things to people like that. Them fights with the kids, kicking them around—you had to put the fear of God in them so they looked up to you, and feared you like you were Jesus Christ.

Those times they'd ganged up on him, kicked the crap out of his belly, every chance they got, hitting for nothing. And all them times laughing at him on account of Pop, laughing because he was too small to smack them around. Now he was making up for the beatings and the laughing. All you had to do was act tough, holler loud, hit and kick once in a while and they had that respect in their eyes.

And soon, like a habit you couldn't shake off, you were

hollering more, hitting without looking for no goddam reason. . . .

Mom pleaded with Brother Burns not to throw Joe out of the school but when she refused to let Joe see a psycho doc Brother Burns said, that's all, Joe Kusack, you're finished.

The Vocational School was his next step. Mom wanted Joe to go to a regular high, like Seward or Stuyvesant, while Joe wanted his working papers. So they talked it over and Joe came to Voc to learn a trade like machine-shop work or something. What a laugh! A lot you could learn in Voc school. It was a ball. In Catholic High the kids listened. Maybe they were scared. They listened and if you listened you had to learn something.

In Voc school nobody listened. Teach talked his heart out but the guys were fooling around, talking, cutting up the desk. Ruby, a crazy bastard with pimples all over his face, was having a good time showing off what he had, waving it around like it was a flag or something. Teach made believe he didn't see. Teach was scared Ruby'd bust him one and if Teach ever squealed and got Ruby thrown out of Voc the rest of the class would sure take it out on him.

Joe wanted to learn. Honest to God and hope to die, he wanted to know all about sheet metal and screws and bolts and stuff like that, but he was the only guy in the class with such a crazy idea, so after a while he thought the hell with it, no use having the guys laughing at him and pointing him out as if he were a queer whenever he brought in homework.

By the time Joe was sixteen he was sick of school. What the hell was the use of wasting time? But he couldn't just

quit. Mom wouldn't let him, and if he did, she'd see to it that he came right back. So he had to do it his way, like in Catholic High. All he had to do was pick a fight and belt a teacher.

Mister Spawn wasn't a bad guy but he was scared of his shadow. If Joe were Mister Spawn, he'd never let kids crap all over him. Joe'd bust them around a little and maybe they'd come back at him and he'd bust them some more and after a while they'd get it into their fat heads that Joe wouldn't take crap from nobody and they'd shut up when he talked. But Spawn was chicken and everybody knew it.

So, this day, Teach came into class after shmoozing around in the hall with Miss Humphrey, the English teacher. Joe could see by the way Spawn watched her strut her big can down the hall, Teach had a hard-on for her. Then Spawn saw the class and the light went out of his watery eyes. He closed the door and he looked kind of sad as he banged the desk with his ruler. It took ten minutes for the guys to stop horsing around.

When it was nice and quiet, except for Blackie spitting on the floor and smearing it with his big canal-boat shoes, Joe said, from where he sat in back of the room, "She sure is nice, Mr. Spawn."

Teach got flustered, his glasses dancing on his hook nose. "She?"

"Miss Humphrey." The guys began to make sounds like they were dying for it, and Ruby started to rub himself. Joe said, "I could go for her myself."

Teach banged the ruler. "That's enough of that, Kusack."

Joe said, "Sure, Teach. It ain't true, I'll bet."

Spawn was picking up a book. For a second he didn't bite, then he said, "What isn't true, Kusack?"

"She's hump-free."

He didn't catch on. "Miss Humphrey."

The class was beginning to laugh it up. "Hump-free," they sang. "That's for me. . . ."

Teach blinked, a real square from a fag joint.

Joe said, "If she's hump-free, I'd like a piece myself. I'm sick a payin' for it."

It hit Teach right between his squint eyes and he forgot he was getting in enemy territory when he came busting down the aisle to wave the ruler in Joe's face.

"You have a filthy mouth, Kusack."

Joe was the most innocent guy. "I said somethin', Teach?"

"You know my name, Kusack; Mister Spawn."

"Sure, Teach. Now about hump-free—"

"Miss Humphrey to you," he hollered, shaking.

Joe said, "You hear that, fellers? He promised hump-free to me."

Teach stamped his foot like a girl. "I'll wash your mouth with soap."

"What I said? Hey, fellers, what I said? You said—"

"Never mind what I said. Shut up!" He turned on the class on account of they were really going to town. "All of you, shut up!"

They didn't even hear him. He was busting a gut, so he tried to take it out on Joe, grabbing him by the neck, swinging the ruler. Joe grabbed the ruler, ripped it out of his hand, slapped Spawn's hand away from his neck. Perry Compton bent down behind Teach. It was a setup. Joe put his hands on Teach's chicken chest, pushed. He went over

Perry's back, slammed into a desk. The class gave Joe a cheer and he wished Frankie could have seen what a real guy Joe was, then he'd say, okay, Joe, you're a Panther.

The class sang and danced and all of a sudden it was dead quiet. Teach was still on the floor. He hadn't moved.

Everybody was hollering. Wha' happened, wha' happened?

Joe bent over Teach. "C'mon, get up. Don't be a crazy bastard, get up."

Maybe Joe was a little scared. He didn't know. Busting a teach was one thing, but he didn't want to kill the guy. He turned Spawn face up and Joe saw the blood coming out of the nose. Joe looked around the class and they looked right back and it was quiet. All of a sudden, just when Joe was figuring how he could get out of town, Teach sat up. Joe breathed easier. Now he could get ready to take a trip to the principal's office, the last stop before getting heaved out of school.

Teach walked to his desk like he was on stilts, wiped the blood from his nose, looked at his handkerchief.

Joe said, "Lipstick, Teach?"

Teach said, "Sit down, Kusack." He went to the door, opened it, looked outside, came back to his seat. The whole floor, the whole goddam school, had heard the racket but like always nobody stuck his nose in.

Teach said, "Open your books to page sixty-one."

No-guts Spawn made like nothing had happened. Joe didn't want it like that, but he remembered Teach's white face looking up at him and Joe didn't want to go through that scene again.

A week later he got booted out of Voc. Miss Humphrey did the job when Joe played the same hump-free gag

on her, and when she turned to walk away on him, gave her a little goose, all five fingers, and cried as if his hand were broken, "Gimme back my fingers. Humphrey got my fingers."

2.

For a while Joe was doing okay with the Panthers. When he told them the story, it was good for a laugh and a pat on the back. He'd walk down the street and guys from Voc would give him a big hello. It sure felt like the money, and knowing it wouldn't be long before he got that Panther cockamamie on his arm, he could feel the black panther crawling down his muscle.

That was when he got loused up with that soup-sandwich business.

Once when Joe was a kid the Edgies sent him out to Surprise Lake for a couple weeks. He didn't want to go but Mom made him. In Surprise a guy could learn a lot of things. Like when they told you to get the napkin creaser. You soon found out there ain't no such thing. And they got no key to the oarlocks. And no red light oil. And they don't diaper the flies to keep them from crapping on the lake. And they don't cover the lake when it's raining. You learn things like that up in Surprise.

But Joe'd never heard of any soup sandwich, so how was he supposed to know it was a gag?

So, Joe was coming out of Marchiony's with the fellers. Frankie was treating on account of he'd busted into a car and got a satchel full of stuff which he'd sold to the fence for five bucks. There was Shlemie, Lippy, Doc and Joe,

and they ordered banana royals, and after loading themselves good, went outside. Shlemie swiped a pack of gum while Frankie was paying the bill; Lippy got a dime Hershey. Joe got nothing on account of Lippy was blocking him and before Joe could get set, the cashier had both eyes open.

Yussel Wacks was shmoozing with a couple guys outside Marchiony's. This was the year before Yuss got in strong with the Delancey Street mob, big guys who got rake-offs from bookies or else the poor *shmuck* got kidnapped or something. Now Yuss was just a tough hood who cut crap games, he and his pal Big Mac.

Frankie didn't know Yuss, not to talk to anyway, but the wise guy wanted to show off so he said, "Hi, Yuss, maybe I can buy you a drink or something?"

Yuss laughed, mussed up Frankie's vaseline job on his hair. "Yeh, get me a soup sandwich."

The guys kind of laughed and maybe Joe should have got wise but all he could figure was: this could be his chance to get in solid with somebody big, and if he could make time with Yuss he'd be as good as in the Panthers.

Joe said, "Sure, Yuss, you want me to get the soup sandwich for you?"

They gave him funny looks and, it seemed to Joe, Frankie was burning up on account of Joe was doing Yuss a favor.

Yuss said, "Sure thing, kid. Here," he flipped Joe half a buck. "Go over to Gluckstern's. He's got soup sandwiches that are real good. They slide down your gullet so fast you hardly know you ate it."

Joe ran all the way to Gluckstern's on Delancey Street.

The waiter had sleepy eyes and his hair stood up like black wire. When Joe told him what he wanted, the waiter looked as if Joe had bugs crawling over his face.

"A soup sandwich? Barley or green pea?"

Joe said, "He didn't tell me what kind."

"Tomorrow," the waiter said, "we got vegetable soup."

Joe said, "Today, not tomorrow. Make it barley."

The waiter took the half buck and he went strutting off to the kitchen like he had a load on. Joe watched customers packing away the big steaks and chickens and chops, until the cashier told him, please get to one side, you're blocking the aisle.

The waiter came, holding the bag like he had a loaded bomb. He shoved it into Joe's hand and steered him right out the door kind of in a hurry, like Joe was dirty or something.

"Eat with a hearty appetite," he said.

Joe said, "Whatsamatter, no change?"

The waiter said, "For a good soup sandwich fifty cents is cheap. Please do me a favor, don't come again. Fifty cents ain't worth it if the customers lose their appetites."

Boy, he sure was a crazy bastard, that waiter.

Joe ran down Clinton Street, into Grand. Yuss and the guys were waiting, laughing like anything. When Joe handed Yuss the bag he stopped laughing.

"You got it?" Yuss said. "A soup sandwich?"

"Barley," Joe said, feeling good. "Half a buck. My old lady could of made you a whole pot for two bits."

Yuss's face was red-looking and all screwed up. He took out the sandwich from inside the bag, smacked Joe in the face with the wet bag.

"Dumb Polack," he hollered, and the guys all looked at Joe. Nobody was laughing now. Yuss was sore, so everybody was sore.

Joe said, "You don't like barley?"

Yuss opened the wax paper. The bread was soaked. He lifted one slice. It sure was a funny looking sandwich, just two slices of wet bread, hardly no barley or nothing.

Joe said, "That waiter couldn't put some lettuce on?"

All of a sudden Yuss let out a howl like he'd been stabbed, and shoved the sandwich right into Joe's face and rubbed it in good.

"Eat it, you dumb Polack," he cried. "Half a buck."

Joe shook him off. Yuss started to laugh. Joe guessed he must have looked funny, the sandwich spread over his pan. Then everybody laughed, Big Mac and the other guy Joe didn't even know and Frankie and Lippy and Doc and Shlemie. Joe stood there shaking.

Laughing, all the time laughing!

He wiped the mashed sandwich from his face, flipped it into Yuss's puss.

"Eat it yourself!" he cried.

Big Mac grabbed Joe by the neck, held him while Yuss slapped him twice, kicked him out in the gutter.

Yuss yelled, "Dumb Polack . . . soup sandwich . . . half a buck."

A grapefruit, kind of spoiled, was lying right by the curb. Joe picked it up, heaved. He missed Yuss, connected with Big Mac's face. Joe ran like hell.

Up in his house, he went into his bedroom and sat on the bed and leaned back against the wall. He felt sick in his belly. He'd never get in the Panthers now, never in a million years. He'd always be a nobody for other gangs

to pick on. Joe began to cry. He couldn't help it. He cried and the more he cried the worse it got.

As a kid, Joe used to lie on the floor and bang his head on the boards until somebody came running to stop him. The banging didn't hurt, but they didn't know that. Now he sat on the bed and hit his head on the wall and this time it hurt like anything.

"Joe, stop it." It was Mom. "What for you bangin' the plaster off'n the wall?"

He looked but he hadn't banged nothing off the wall. Mom sat down by his side and put her fat arm around his neck and Joe let it there for a while. It felt good, her arm was so soft and warm. Then he pushed it off. Hell, he was no pissy kid.

"What's wrong, Joe?" And when he just shook his head, Mom said, "For once in your life, Joe, tell me what's in your heart."

"Leave me alone. I just got a headache."

She got up, wiped her hands on her apron. "Secrets," she said, so low he could hardly hear her. "Open up, Joe, talk to me. I'm your Mom. Maybe I can help."

Mom help him get in the Panthers?

She said, "All right, Joe, sit there and cry."

"I ain't cryin'."

"What's that come out a your eyes, water? If you're hungry there's cold ham. Empty the water from under the icebox."

The next day when Joe met Frankie Davis and Lippy in the street, he made like he didn't see them.

Lippy, skinny as a toothpick, hollered, "Hi, Joe," from across the street.

Joe kept walking. Maybe they weren't laughing right

now, but Joe wouldn't give them a chance to, neither. So he wouldn't belong to the Panthers, so what? There were other gangs, bigger ones. He'd find them. Only these other guys, they had no Panthers on their arms. He cut into Attorney Street, sick to his stomach on account of he'd never get the black panther, and if he didn't get it, how in hell would he ever get next to Sade?

That was a doll for you, blond and stacked solid. Sade lived on Ridge. He'd followed her home the first time he'd seen her in the Pitt Street Pool. Just one look at Sade and he'd begun to itch from his belly button right down. Lots of times Joe'd seen her in the pool, sitting up on the concrete steps, and she had her eyes peeled on Frankie's right arm where the black panther sat ready to jump, a beautiful panther with teeth like white bailing hooks and fire in his eyes. And when Joe saw the way she looked at the panther, a kind of respect in her eyes, he knew he had to get the cockamamie or die.

So he walked up Ridge Street hoping he could grab a look at Sade and maybe say Hi, blondie, getting much? Like the other guys said to the broads to start a yakitty-yak ball. But Sade wasn't standing outside her stoop so Joe kept walking, right smack into the gang; Frankie, Lippy, Cheesy Dorfman, Doc, Shlemie and four kids from the Ludlow Dukes who had joined up with the Panthers a couple weeks back.

Joe tried to duck but it was too late. Sure as hell, he figured, the guys were going to rub it in good. He pressed his lips tight. The first guy who laughed got belted. Sure they'd all pile on and give him the business; they were Panthers and they stuck together. But he didn't give a screw, he felt so damn lousy.

Shlemie said, "Hi, Joe, how y' douchin'?"

As they got around him, Joe rolled his shoulders. "Save the crap."

Frankie said, "Where you hidin' out lately, Joe?"

Lippy was playing with some red pills in his hand. Lippy was always playing with goof balls.

Joe said, "I got to go someplace for my old lady."

Frankie said, "Sure, Joe. Just give us a minute. You know that business with the soup sandwich?"

Nobody laughed.

Joe said, "You think I'm stupid or somethin'? I didn't forget."

Lippy said, "You know that guy you pasted with the sandwich was Yuss Wacks?"

"He wasn't no Clark Gable."

Shlemie said, "And that guy you hit with the grapefruit?"

"Big Mac? Say, what's this question business?"

One of the Ludlow kids by the name of Fetky said, "That Yuss likes to stick ice picks up a guy's behind when he's sore. He give it to Augie in the Baths, up the old blowhole, then six times in the heart. It was in the papers."

Joe felt a cold wind running up his back and he had a pain in his left cheek when he thought of the ice pick going in.

Doc said, "You wasn't scared, Joe?"

Joe looked over Doc's head. "What's to be scared?"

Amazed, Cheesy Dorfman shook his head. "I never figured you had so much guts."

Frankie looked happy, like he'd just rolled a geek for a grand. He said to Doc, "Say, Doc, how's about you and

Joe going down to the Bowery and getting a Panther painted on your arm?"

Joe could feel his heart banging like crazy.

Doc said, "My old man'd kill me."

Lippy said, "Why Doc, Frankie? He ain't a real Panther."

Frankie said, "You shut up, Lip."

Joe said, "I can go by myself."

Frankie slapped Joe's back. "Sure, Joe, sure. I'll give you the guy's address. He does all our jobs."

Joe went home singing. At last he was a Panther, all he needed was the cockamamie job and he'd be one of the gang. He didn't worry about the dough. He could lend from Patsy's and pay him back in a couple Saturdays by helping him deliver fish on his truck.

The next day the cockamamie guy worked Joe for five bucks, but he didn't care, it was such a nice job. You'd swear the Panther was going to jump. All the way home he kept touching his arm. The cockamamie guy had hurt him plenty but Joe could take it. He was the happiest guy in the world, and the luckiest.

When he got to the block he found the fire engines and cops all around his building. In the next hour he learned six people had been burned in the fire. Two were dead. When they showed him Mom's body the only way he could identify her was by her wedding ring. You could read the words inside good. In a funny kind of scrawl it said: *Until Death, Jerry to Peg, Dec. 22, 1915.*

3.

Living on your own is pretty nice stuff. Sometimes Joe got to wishing Mom was around to fix things for him, like when his socks ripped and he had to wear them, holes and all, because he didn't have the price of a new pair. Lots of times he was broke. It wasn't easy getting dough. Sometimes he'd roll a bum and get a couple bucks, and once Frankie and Shlemie and Joe busted into P.S. 65 and grabbed three typewriters which got them five bucks apiece.

Then there were the meals. When Joe tired of pastrami and hot dogs and canned stuff, he wished he could get a mouthful of Mom's stew or goulash or things like that. Besides, with Mom, all he had to do was sit down and pack it away. He didn't have to go looking for it; he didn't have to worry about the price on the menu.

Once in a while the fellers took Joe up their house to chisel in on a meal, and Joe got that pot roast and stewed liver his belly had been aching for. But most of the time he was on his own. If he had dough it was Galishoff's for dairy, Gluckstern's for meat. If he wasn't flush, Nedick's was good enough. If he was flat, he drank a couple glasses of water and it filled him up good.

There were times he couldn't pay the rent and got the heave-ho. So he found himself another flat. From Rivington Street, right above Galishoff's where he could smell the cheese bagels and stuff, he moved to Orchard, to Allen, to Essex.

Then he was doing okay. Yuss Wacks supplied the gang

with dough on account of they were doing jobs for him, like banging somebody around, or scaring a guy so he paid up what he owed Yuss. Once the boys swiped a Caddy Yuss needed for a special job. So with Yuss shelling out, Joe ate good and also had ten bucks a month for the rent.

Joe had a nice room on Essex Street. He could look out on Seward Park and watch the kids swinging, and he could see East Broadway with all the knockout cars rolling up and down the street, and then he'd sit down and dream how some day he'd get himself a nice yellow-and-cream Buick. He sure liked this room, then that crazy Lippy had to come up with a couple bleached trims and a pocket full of weeds and half a case of beer. Lippy wanted to have a ball. Joe tried to chase him. Hell, his room wasn't a pad. One of the broads, a fourteen-year-old blonde with roaming hands started to kiss Joe's ears and the next thing he knew they were all high, laughing and laying around on the floor.

Joe's trim gave him no kicks. He couldn't figure it out. Lately, he got no kicks out of a broad. Even Sade who came up to spend a night with him once in a while didn't bang him like the first couple times. Joe got a better bang just watching. Lippy and his redhead jam did a job on the floor and Joe got the shakes, his whole body feeling tight like anything. When Lippy'd finished Joe finished too, like it was him with the redhead instead of Lip.

Once when Joe'd been twelve, something had awakened him in the middle of the night. He'd sat up in bed. Then he heard it again, Mom crying out like she'd been belted. Joe figured sure as hell Pop had come home cockeyed drunk and was slapping Mom around. Pop didn't really

mean it. He only used his big mitts when he had a load on. But, drunk, Pop could kill a guy and never know what he was doing.

So Joe had run into Mom's bedroom. The lamp on the night table was on and there was Pop and Mom in bed and the goddam light was playing over Pop's big ass as it moved around. Mom cried out and Pop rolled off. Joe got sick and scared. He wanted to turn and run but he couldn't move his legs. Then Pop was banging Joe around, calling him dirty names. But somehow the slaps didn't hurt, not too much.

For a long time after that all he could see was Mom spread out, no nightgown, no blanket, no nothing.

Lately, for some crazy reason Joe didn't understand, every time he got on a broad, in a minute she'd look like Mom and Joe'd tighten up and get that same sick feeling, not Mom the way she looked that day in the bedroom, but Mom as he'd seen her after the fire.

Yet, when Joe watched somebody else, like Lippy and his broad, he could make believe it was him instead of Lip and the broad was just a broad.

Anyway, they got high up in Joe's flat and Lippy started to push his broad out the window on account of she didn't want to do any fancy loving for him. The frill hollered bloody murder and Joe just had time to grab her by the leg before Lip let her go. So here Joe was holding onto one leg with both hands, hollering for somebody to give him a hand, and the broad was hanging balls naked five floors over the street screaming her head off. A million people looked up from the street, hoping Joe'd let go.

The blonde helped Joe drag her friend back into the room. They dressed fast and beat it, Lip and his two pots,

but the janitor came up blowing his top. If Joe didn't move, the janitor swore, he'd get the cops to move him. Joe couldn't take chances with cops so he packed and got out.

The next day, the gang came around and busted half the janitor's windows with rocks. A week later when the windows were all fixed the gang smashed them again. The guys got tired of breaking glass so they gave the janitor a break and called it off.

Joe got a nice flat, three rooms all to himself on Delancey Street. The rent was thirty-five bucks a month, but money was coming in and Joe could pay it. When Doc Kramer moved in with Joe on account of his dopey old man had heaved him out of the house, it became a lead-pipe cinch for Joe to pay only half the rent. Besides, it wasn't so lonesome. Doc was a nice guy even if he got creepy once in a while. Doc was a mama's boy and for a long time after he came to live with Joe, he'd cry like a pissy kid in his sleep.

Then Joe hit paydirt. Yuss Wacks gave the gang a good money job. All Joe had to do was hang around Forty-fourth and Eighth till a steerer loaded his car with crap players, real classy-looking suckers. Joe would drive the players out to Long Island to a house surrounded by a lot of big trees, a guy with a gun behind every bush. For the job Joe got ten bucks. Then he'd wait around and after the prayer meeting he'd take the suckers home. This service earned Joe another sawbuck, and every once in a while Joe had a passenger who'd hit the house for a couple grand, and when Joe brought him right up to his house, he was tipped a ten or twenty.

It was a great racket but it only lasted for a month on

account of Yuss's regular drivers, who'd got busted by the cops and served thirty days in the pokey, came back to their jobs.

Funny thing, you listen to comedians rattle off jokes and you wonder who dreams up the gags. Not the big guys like Gleason or Hope or Gobel who pay writers for the dreaming. The little guys, the kind who hang out in a bar and bang them out till you gotta wet your pants from laughing. Real good jokes, not the crappy kind you hear on T.V.

The same for every racket. Somebody figures out some angle and everybody else wonders how come he didn't think of it first. It's so easy every ball lands in the side pocket.

Mike Shlepper was that kind of genius. Mike had been Joe's steerer when he'd worked for Yuss. When Joe was out of a job, he didn't see Mike for a couple weeks till one day Mike came looking for him. Mike was still steering for Yuss but maybe the twenty-five a night wasn't good enough for him because he was hungry to make more.

It was Saturday afternoon when Mike came into the flat and sat down. Doc was out trying to sell a new suit he'd heisted out of a flat upstairs. Mike pushed his hat back and his baldy shone like he'd swabbed it with varnish. Joe and Mike had got to know each other pretty well the month they'd worked together, so Joe knew he had to wait until Mike was ready to spill what he had on his mind. You couldn't hurry Mike.

All of a sudden Mike's hook nose came up and he had a twitch in his left eyelid which covered a hunk of glass, a blue marble that didn't match the good eye.

"We could really make a buck."

Joe figured Mike was just digging the cat, kind of, like when the fellers got jazzed up with a charge and talked crazy. Mike's thin puss turned away as he talked to the wall.

"You and me, we got a chance to make plenty moola but you gotta hate Yuss enough to do him dirt."

Joe lit a cigar and puffed so hard there was a smoke screen between them. "I ain't gettin' in no trouble, not with Yuss."

"If it ain't you, it'll be somebody else. I can get somebody to drive for me. Only I figured you never did like Yuss, and me and you is friends. Fifty bucks a night, Joe, and maybe a chance for a couple C notes."

The cigar smoke caught in Joe's throat and for a minute he thought he'd croak.

"For that kind of dough, I hate Yuss like poison."

Mike's horse head came around, his good eye looking right at Joe. "You know Lefty Damiano?"

"Sure I know Lefty. He used to hang out on Delancey and Clinton, till he moved to Catherine Street and became boss of his mob. Lefty's mob ain't in the same league with Yuss's, but he makes a buck, I hear, in his own racket."

Mike sniffed like the smoke was bothering him. "Lefty runs crap games twice a week, Wednesdays and Saturdays, around the Seventy-fourth Street neighborhood, a floating prayer meetin'. Lefty can use more customers, so you and me are gonna get them for him."

Mike looked kind of dopey and he sounded worse, but Joe knew Mike was one shrewd operator. "You gotta draw me a picture, Mike."

Mike got up, went to the window and looked up at the sky. Joe could have told him it was fair and sunny.

Mike said, "If you're parked in a car off Eighth Avenue, say around Forty-fourth, I could steer some of Yuss's customers to your car 'stead of to Ralph, Yuss's driver. Once you're loaded you could head for where Lefty is runnin' his game. I could get five more easy for Ralph and Yuss'd never know what we pulled. One load and you got fifty bucks and a per cent of whatever Lefty takes 'em for. Nice setup."

Joe shook his head. He was mixed up. So Mike explained again: Mike was to fill Joe's car with suckers and Joe'd take them to Lefty's game. It sounded okay. But there had to be a hitch. Joe was no dope.

"You get it?" Mike said.

Joe said, "Won't Yuss get mad, us giving Lefty five cream balls?"

"Who's gonna tell 'im?"

"You mean we keep it under our hats."

Mike groaned and grabbed his head. "Maybe I shouldn'ta started with you. Hell, you never went to college."

That Mike was a crazy bastard. What did college have to do with it?

Joe thought some more and got another whack in the brain. "Them five suckers, Mike, they won't like me takin' them to Lefty when they want to play in Yuss's game."

Mike squinted his good eye and he sure looked nuts. "A game's a game to a guy attendin' a prayer meetin'. Believe me, I know. Once they're at Lefty's, they won't wanna go lookin' for Yuss's game. They'll get plenty ac-

tion at Lefty's and be satisfied, just so long as it's a crap game."

Joe was still mixed up. "Suppose they balk? Everybody knows Yuss runs a legit game. I don't know about Lefty. He's liable to rob them blind."

"That's their worry. You in or out?"

"Yuss is going to blow the roof off."

"He ain't gonna know."

"These players, they got tongues."

"You dumb Polack, can't you listen? I know these customers. They know me. What I tell 'em goes. I can square anythin'. You think I'm stickin' my neck out if I didn't know I could control these players? You just drive the load to Seventy-fourth and First. Stop on the northeast corner. Some guy will come over and tell you the number of the house. You drop 'em off and somebody else will take over."

Joe didn't like it. "Suppose they blow the whistle?"

Mike was sore now. "As long as they got a game, these customers will be happy. Believe me. So Yuss loses five customers. What the hell is five customers in one night when he's got a packed house? Fifty, twice fifty sometimes. A lousy five! Aw, forget it. We're still friends, Joe? You'll forget what I said? I'll get somebody else to drive the car. I just figured I'd let you in on a good thing."

"Wait a minute," Joe said. "Let me think."

"Not you, Joe. You don't think; lemme do that."

"Fifty bucks . . ."

"Forget it."

"Don't pull that on me, Mike. I need dough. I'm broke."

"Okay, Joe, last chance. Yes or no?"

"Yeh, yeh, yeh." Joe's chest was hurting like it would explode. "I'm with you. . . ."

Joe discovered that Mike was right. A crap player is a funny kind of guy. That night Joe hired a car and parked on Eighth and Forty-fourth. When he had a load, three men and two dames, he took them to Seventy-fourth and First. A guy came over and told Joe to go to Seventy-fifth and to drop the players off on the corner. One of the players asked how come he wasn't going out to Long Island. Joe told him they had a better crap game here.

"Maybe I'll have better luck in New York," one said, and they all laughed and everybody was one big happy family.

4.

Money came in fast and easy, and Joe spent it faster and easier. He bought so many sport jackets and suits, the closet got too small. He'd look in the shop window and see a tie he liked so he'd buy every color in the same pattern. He saw movies up on Broadway, sometimes two different ones in one day. Joe got cockeyed watching Grace Kelly give out.

In Heshie's candy store Joe ate halvah and Nestlé's with nuts till he couldn't eat any more. He ate more pastrami sandwiches in a week then in any one year of his life. He bought for the boys too, eats and sometimes a tie or a shirt. He'd go into Moishe's bar and holler for Moishe to fill them up for the crowd. The money made a fire in his pocket and he had to put out the blaze. Guys came

around and patted him on the back and said he was one real big guy. No more dumb Polack. A guy with dough in his pocket couldn't be dumb. Everybody was his friend. Joe Kusack, smart boy Joe Kusack, the guy with a big brain. Anybody who could outsmart Yuss Wacks had to have it upstairs.

Lately, Sade was kind of grouchy. Maybe it was because Joe banged her once in a while. He didn't mean it. He'd take her in his arms and they'd roll around on the bed until Joe thought he'd split a gut. No kicks. He'd sweat and strain like he was going to bust wide open. Not a goddam kick. Sade had become Mom, every inch of her burned and terrible-looking. So all of a sudden Joe slapped Sade, first on the big behind, one hand, then the other, nice and sharp, and he shifted to the thighs and like a crazy bastard, clipped her on the chin.

Only Sade didn't like her kicks that way. She stayed away until Joe came busting into her house, scaring the pants off her old lady who had an old guy, around thirty years old, fooling around with her on the couch. The old lady hollered Sade was in the bedroom and Joe should get out of the front room. Sure enough, Sade was in bed. She looked kind of scared when he walked in on her. He could tell by the way she lifted the blanket around her chin. Joe gave her the bottle of smelly perfume; twenty-five bucks' worth, and she was his girl again.

And when he slapped her around, she cried a little so he shut her up with a ten-dollar bill.

They were having cokes and rye in Moishe's.

Doc said, "For cryin' out loud, Joe, you rob a bank?

Every day drinks for the boys. If you make a big sting, maybe you should save some of the dough. When you're broke these guys will buy you piss."

The Spik said, "Piss, no beer chaser."

Moishe and his bartender hopped around filling orders. Moishe came back to Joe, took a twenty Joe'd laid on the table. Moishe made change, and when Joe looked down a lone buck and change was sliding around in the beer suds. Joe took out his roll, peeled off two tens. Doc's eyes rolled and the Spik gaped.

Joe was just dying to tell them how he'd grabbed himself one hundred and fifty in just one night when Lefty's suckers paid off in gold bricks, but Mike had made him swear never to open his yap to anybody.

"You tell one," Mike said, "and there's another mouth we got to worry about. You believe me, even my wife don't know a thing. We got to keep it to ourself. Somebody opens his mouth, Yuss cuts our heart out."

Doc was Joe's tight friend, and the Spik too. Lots of times Juan catted out when he'd had trouble at home, sleeping over Joe's flat, on the floor.

Joe said, "Don't be crazy bastards and ask questions. You don't know, it don't hurt you."

Doc was sore. "You didn't think that up by yourself."

"No," Joe said. "Some other donkey make it up."

Doc looked smart. "Mike Shlepper is no donkey."

Joe spilled his drink, wiped his wet hand on his new sport jacket. Tomorrow he'd buy another jacket. He already had the goddam jacket over a week.

He took Doc's arm. "What do you know, Doc? Tell me, you got to."

Doc laughed it off. "Nothing, Joe. I was just shootin'

the breeze. Honest. I saw Mike hangin' around you so I took a guess."

Watching Joe with his big sad eyes, the Spik drank booze.

Joe said, "Don't ask me, Doc. Do me a favor, don't ask."

"If that's how you want it. I thought maybe, you being my buddy, you'd let us in on it. We need the dough bad."

"You mean he needs it bad." He jabbed his thumb into the Spik's belly. "How much you usin' a day, Juan? Six fixes? Ten?"

Juan was the most surprised guy you ever saw. "Six? You *loco* maybe? One, sometime nothin'."

Doc said, "Okay, so it's Juan who needs the dough. Me, I can starve."

Joe slipped an arm around Doc's shoulders. "You want fifty?"

"I wanna make it myself, not borrow it."

"I give you fifty, it's a present."

"No. You're makin' it; why can't I?"

Joe took his arm away. Why not? He could learn Doc how to drive in a week. They could get another car and Mike could steer five more suckers to Doc's car. . . .

Joe said, "I can't. Honest to God, hope to die. Five is all Mike can push my way."

"Five? Mike pushes five what? You mean . . . ?"

Joe said, "Moishe, give us a couple blasts. C'mon, Doc, have one. Juan, you goin' to play with that goddam drink all day?"

Juan gulped it down and held the glass up. "*Arriba!*" he hollered, some of the stuff dripping from the glass onto his head. "*Saludos!*"

Doc said, "Keep your drinks."

"You're sore, Doc. Don't be sore." Moishe filled Joe's glass. He reached for it and the whiskey dumped all over the bar. Joe ran his hand through the stuff, licked his fingers. "Doc . . . ? Where . . . ?"

Juan said, "Don' worry, Doc be okay. Doc just a little down in dump. Doc wanna take his girl to movie."

"I wanted to give the crazy bastard fifty."

Joe couldn't see the Spik's face, just his shoulders going up and down, then sideways. "Doc don' want lend. Doc owe you plenty."

Joe slapped the bar and the liquor splashed all over the place. The guys sitting near Joe gave him a look.

Joe looked back. "What the hell you lookin' at?"

They moved away before Joe could bounce a bottle off their goddam heads. Joe looked for Juan but the face belonged to a ding-a-ling broad.

Joe said, "Where'd that crazy bastard Spik go?"

Sade's face came close. "He's outside with Doc. They're planning a job, I'll bet."

When Moishe filled his glass, Joe grabbed it with both hands. Down the hatch! Joe wiped his mouth.

"Doc's sore. What the friggin' hell's he got to be sore?" The tears started to roll down his face. He couldn't stop them. They just came up, burned a little and rolled. "Just because I don't wanna tell him."

Sade said, "Cut it out, Joe, everybody's looking."

"Cut what out?"

"You got a cryin' jag on."

"Hey, Moishe, where's that goddam drink I ordered? Just because I didn't wanna tell them. Hey, Moishe, since when you serve empty glasses?"

"You dumped it," Moishe said. "Soon I swim in schnapps."

Sade pulled at Joe's jacket. "What didn't you wanna tell Doc?"

"Mind your own friggin' business. How'd I get my shirt wet?"

Sade got smart. "You got a hole in your chest. . . . Who you workin' for, Joe?" Her hands crawled around his leg. "You can tell Sade."

Joe slid off the stool. The whole goddam room moved. Sade held him up. "C'mon, Joe," her voice sounded good. "I'll take you home."

Imagine Sade asking for it! Joe threw his chest out. Suddenly the room turned upside down.

In the morning he had a head like a medicine ball and his belly made funny squishy noises. His clothes were piled on the floor like a bunch of rags.

Joe cried, "Hey, Doc, what time did I come home?" He grabbed his head to keep it from going off like a flying saucer.

Doc came in, stood over him. "You didn't. I came and got you from where you were stretched out in the alley next to Moishe's."

Joe tried to think, his head hurting worse. Somebody was supposed to take him home. . . .

"I'm payin'," he told Doc. "You did me a favor. It's worth fifty."

Doc was sore again. "Shove it. What the hell am I, your lackey or somethin'? I would've done the same for any dog."

Joe held his head. "Please, Doc, don't holler."

"Anyway," Doc said, "I don't think you got a dime left."

Joe picked up his jacket, felt around. "I must a had somethin' left. Where the hell's my wallet?"

Doc laughed. Joe shouted, "Who swiped my wallet?"

Doc said, "You got rolled by a gang of kids. Some old lady told me. It reminds me of another gang of kids."

Joe hollered bloody murder while Doc laughed like a crazy bastard. Joe yelled so much his head was busting, but Doc kept laughing and Joe couldn't understand what the hell was so funny.

Saturday night Joe was parked in the Caddy, waiting for show break so Mike could steer five suckers to him. Mike came along, looked up and down the street, slipped into the back seat.

Mike said, "I don't like the way Yuss looked me over today."

"What does that mean?"

"Maybe we oughtta skip it today."

"That's what you said last week."

"I got a feelin'."

"Stop talkin' crazy. They're breakin'. . . ."

Mike buttoned his collar and hustled off. In a half hour five fares and Joe were driving out to Brooklyn, where the game had moved. The traffic was kind of heavy on the Williamsburg Bridge and it took Joe a good hour to roll up to Pitkin and Thatford. He waited a minute, then one of Lefty's boys, Tommy, came up and whispered a number. Joe took the car around the corner, into Thatford for two blocks, and stopped.

It was quiet on Thatford, dead quiet. Another minute and Lefty's boy, Barney Silva, came over and ordered Joe to go one more block and stop on the corner. Joe followed instructions. On the corner the suckers got out and the third guy in Lefty's mob, Paul Canella, took them down to the basement of a two-family house. Joe drove to the next corner, across the street, lit a cigar, sucked on it. Later, he would go inside and maybe grab himself a sandwich and a drink.

When he tired of smoking, Joe flipped the cigar out the window, right into a black puddle of rain water, got out of the car, stretched.

About to slam the door, he stopped, paralyzed. Down Thatford, like fire engines without gongs, came two black cars, rolling right up to the curb of the two-family house. Joe figured, it's cops.

He could just make out Silva coming out of the dark, his hands in his pockets. The car door opened and guys poured out like a hungry mob. Silva's hand came out of his pocket and the moonlight hit the big shiny piece in his mitt. Silva never got to use it. A big guy, big as a giant, moved fast. Joe couldn't see what the hell he did but Silva crumpled like he'd been kicked between the legs by a mule. The big guy lifted his head. He had a little beard. The sonofabitch was Big Mac.

Joe dived into the Caddy and he was flying in two seconds flat.

Near the bridge he had to stop to get rid of the shakes. In a bar he downed two fast ones, then played around with one more. And all the time he wondered how Yuss had found out, and what Yuss would do about it.

It was three in the morning when Joe got to the neigh-

borhood. He parked the car in the garage on Suffolk Street. The street was so dark he had ants crawling up his ass, but when he hit Delancey Street where it was nice and light and a million people all around him, he felt better. Crossing the gutter he stopped in front of his building.

He don't know, Joe, Yuss don't know 'bout you.

He moved through the hall, up two stairs. A guy came out from where a door led to the alley. Joe looked down on him, the man just looked up at Joe. Then Joe heard somebody coming down the stairs. Yonkel Levine, one of Yuss's boys, came into view. Joe went back the two steps, ready to run out to the street. And like a mountain, Big Mac was coming through the hall, a tight grin on his face.

Joe's stomach churned and he had cramps real bad. They went to work on him. Joe tried to holler but nothing came out, just crazy sounds, and they banged him between the legs and his guts felt like they'd busted open and the cramps in his belly came out in his pants. Even when his head was full of black fog, a long way off Joe knew they were still kicking him around, but he felt nothing.

5.

Joe was flat on his back and so weak and full of aches he couldn't turn his head. Somebody was crying like a baby. Joe saw a nurse go by and in a minute the crying stopped. Voices, a million of them all around him, tired voices, sick. Somebody started to moan like an old

woman and a big brown-skinned nurse was standing over him. Her mouth moved. She had a nice smile. Joe wished to hell he knew what she was saying. The crying started again and there was no more nurse. He closed his eyes and now he was back in the charcoal hole.

Joe was out, on and off, for three days. That was what they told him when he finally realized they'd parked his body in the ward in Gouverneur Hospital, Joe and twenty other sick guys. They had beds all around the place, around the walls and right smack down the center of the big room. It wasn't easy for visitors to come through.

On Joe's left was a pneumonia case, an old guy just lying with his mouth open, oxygen tubes up his nose, hunks of tape holding them in place. On Joe's right was a Spik kid who'd got that thing they call rheumatism fever and he had a sugar sickness and he was blind. Otherwise he was okay. Right in front of Joe, in the middle of the floor where people were supposed to walk, was a shriveled old guy fighting to get out of his bed. They had him tied down, hands and feet spread-eagled, and the way he tried to go over the metal sides you'd never know he had a heart condition.

And all goddam day and night, guys were crying and dying all around him.

After three days the nurse jerked off the tape and pulled the big needle out of Joe's wrist where they'd been feeding him some yellow piss water out of the bottle hanging upside down over his bed. The nurse came back later and dropped a tray on his belly.

"Eat," she said.

She must have been kidding because when Joe tried to shove a forkful of mashed potatoes in his yap, there was

a big hole where he should have had teeth. His lips were puffed like an Ubangi's. Joe pushed the tray and it fell to the floor. Joe told the nurse what to do with the vegetables and the tray. For a dame her size it should have been a cinch.

Before the week was gone Joe had two visitors, two bulls from the seventh precinct. They had the same old routine. Every kid in the gang knew it by heart. One cop told you how sorry he was, how sorry the whole goddam police department was and how the guys who had done the job should get the same dose. When Joe didn't bite the other cop told him how maybe he deserved it on account of what Joe'd done.

The bastard didn't know what Joe had done. And the first cop wasn't worried about Joe, and the goddam department wouldn't care if the guys who had beat him did it all over again. Those bulls were just looking for citations and paper medals for pulling a Dick Tracy.

Joe played it cute. Some guys had jumped him, beat the piss out of him. He didn't know why or who. Hell, he couldn't even guess. No, it wasn't a rival gang on account of Joe didn't belong to a gang. The Panthers were a social club, so Joe didn't know any rival gangs. Maybe, the cops said, it was somebody bigger, somebody like Yuss Wacks? Joe figured somebody'd got a peep at Yuss's boys and blew the whistle. That was the only way the cops broke a case, by some stooly ratting.

Joe told the bulls he didn't know Yuss Wacks. Sure he'd heard of him but who ain't? They kept pumping questions, so Joe hollered so loud the other patients joined in like it was a game, and the nurse chased the bulls.

Those dopey cops! What'd they want Joe to do, rat on

Yuss and his boys? A beating Joe could take, a wooden kimono under six feet of earth he couldn't take.

Joe thought how nice it would be if Yuss and Big Mac and Yonkel Levine beat the hell out of him until Joe kicked off. And Joe'd be in a coffin and Yuss'd be in bracelets. And the two bulls'd point to Joe in the box and Yuss'd shake like anything and be sorry he ever knocked Joe off. Then they'd sit Yuss in the hot seat and Joe'd get out of the box and pull the switch.

Sonofabitch Yuss, you're dead and I done it!

Visiting was Wednesday and Sunday from two to three-thirty. Doc and Juan came up on a Sunday. Some of the gang, including Dolly, Doc's girl, were waiting their turn outside, as only two could visit at one time.

Juan started to kid around. Joe was his *amigo* but how come he was faking. Doc said something, too, but Joe didn't answer him.

Doc said, "You hear me, Joe? I brought you some comic books."

Doc laid a bundle of joke books on the side of the bed. On top was Orphan Annie, Joe's favorite. Joe shoved the pile off the bed.

Doc said, "What the hell you doin', Joe?"

Joe didn't look at him. He couldn't, for if he did Joe was liable to kill the no-good bastard. Doc picked up the books, put them in the same spot. Joe's hand began to shake like he had a real bad hangover.

"Take them away," Joe said. "Juan, do you know how I got in this fix?"

Juan lifted one shoulder. "We hear talk. Yuss, him make sure everybody know."

Doc said, "We guessed there's some connection between your job and this hospital bed."

Joe hollered, "You should know, you friggin' bastard. You put me here. You did this to me."

The blood left Doc's face and he was white like anything. The no-good louse. Joe'd figured it out. Who else sang a song in Yuss's ear? Who else knew?

Juan said, "Joe talk *loco*."

Joe hollered, "He tipped off Yuss. How much did you get, Doc? You get enough dough to straighten you out?"

The nurse came over. "You boys will have to leave."

Doc's eyes burned on Joe's face. "What did I tell Yuss?"

"You know goddam well what you told."

"I forgot. Tell me."

"You told him I'd been workin' for Lefty Damiano."

"How could I tell him when I didn't know myself?"

"Don't give me that crap. I told you Saturday in Moishe's. You sure pumped me good when I had that load on, but I got a good head. I remember every word."

Juan said, "You make mistake. Juan help Doc pump, but you say nothing."

Joe cried, "Stick with Doc, go on stick with a rat."

The nurse got tough. "I'll call the guard."

Doc's pan was a mile long. "We're leaving, nurse."

"Move out, Doc," Joe told him. "Move out of the flat."

Juan was ready to cry. "Joe, no say this to Doc."

Joe said, "You like rats, you live with him. And, Doc, just one thing: Stay away from the block, because so help me, Jesus, I'm goin' to take it out on you, every pain, every tooth, every drop of blood I lost, then I'm goin' to kill you dead."

Doc knew Joe wasn't just talking.

"C'mon, Juan," he said. "Explaining won't help. Joe always was a dumb bastard."

Joe tried to get out of bed. "I'll kill you, kill you."

The nurse just touched his chest, pushed him back on the pillow like he was a kid. Joe spit at her. She told him to cut it out or he'd be sorry. He called her a couple of names. The whole goddam ward was buzzing. He tried to climb out of bed and when she tried to stop him again, he belted her. Like he was a powderpuff puncher, she took his best right hand shot without blinking. Joe spit at her again and all of a sudden a whole army of doctors and nurses came running. They threw a screen around him and tied him down, each arm, each leg around a post. He fought and he hollered, not knowing what the hell he was saying. A nurse came over, a big hypo on a load of cotton. She looked happy when she stuck the whole frigging needle in his arm.

The last two weeks in the hospital they let Joe off the bed so he could limp around the room. Two big months had been shot out of his life, two months of listening and watching guys dying had made him feel like he'd like to croak too.

Joe's left knee, the doc said, would get better some day, but Joe had been conned by experts. Gone forever was his hip walk, the swagger he'd practiced for a hundred hours, that gait where you moved your legs by rolling your hips, the rest of you straight as a board, that goddam beautiful strut that told the whole world you were bigger and better than anybody. He'd never get that back again. Christ, it was enough to break a guy's heart.

He just had to get away from the stinking hospital smell, a million miles away from the hospital meals, the hospital people, away from a place where guys died during the night and new ones took their places in the morning.

Joe was discharged at the end of March. It felt good outside, the sun warm on his back. He went down the couple brown steps out into Water Street.

A sedan pulled up at the curb, like it'd been waiting across the street for Joe to show up, and the Spik got out.

Juan gave his special grin, teeth and all. "C'mon, Joe, we take you home"

Joe waved him off. "I don't want no favors from nobody."

The Spik was hurt. "Juan is nobody?"

Joe felt funny. After all, Juan was a right guy. Joe laughed. "You're a crazy bastard, coming here with a car. How'd you know I'd be out today?"

"We come couple times, talk to doctor. Him tell us."

Joe looked in the car where Doc was sitting, smoking a butt.

Joe said, "A lousy cripple, Doc, that's what I am, a lousy cripple."

Doc laughed. "A cop chases you, I'll bet you do a hundred under ten seconds."

Joe said, "Yeh, with you one step ahead of me. A helluva tight friend you are, one visit in two months."

Doc didn't hop on Joe like he should have. "What was the sense? Those other patients are sick enough without listening to us fight."

Doc pushed open the front door and Joe slid onto the

front seat, rubbed his knee. The damn thing hurt like a sonofabitch. "Yeh," he said.

Doc didn't let him get away with that. "You can do better."

Joe couldn't look him in the eye. "I can get real dumb sometimes." He turned around to him and Doc had a smile on his face. "What the hell, Doc, you want me to get down on my knees?"

Doc shook his head. "You said enough."

Joe rubbed his knee with both hands. "I had a lot of time to use my noodle. It couldn't have been you, Doc. Now I know it. I shouldn't have opened my big mouth."

"That's no mouth; that's Grand Canyon."

"Yeah. Six teeth, front row center. . . . Who spilled the setup to Yuss?" In his heart, Joe knew. He'd figured it out; it could be nobody else. "Doc, how's Sade?"

Juan came in, closed the door. Doc looked out the window. Juan started the car and it pulled away, nice and smooth. Doc whistled something.

Joe said, "You see her, don't you, Doc? Sade, I mean."

Juan said, "Doc, him don't move out. Couple times Juan cat out with Doc. Okay, Joe?"

Joe said, "Okay, if you didn't leave any needles in the bed."

Juan laughed. "Maybe one, maybe two."

"Doc," Joe cried, "you deaf or somethin'?"

Doc didn't look around. "I hear good, Joe, too good."

"Once she didn't visit me, not even one goddam time. Like I was dead. . . ."

Doc said, "Tell you the truth, Joe, I haven't seen her around."

"Don't give me that. She goes down to the Club, doesn't she?"

Doc's head came around and his eyes had fever. "I guess so, but we wouldn't know."

"What the hell . . . ?"

"We're out, Juan and me."

Juan said, "You out, Joe, so we be out too."

Joe said, "Yuss gave orders."

Doc laughed. "Yuss to Frankie to us. Like a triple play. Oh, they didn't chase us, but you were out, Frankie said, so we told Frankie we couldn't hang around."

Joe laughed but it didn't sound right on account of his insides were busting. All his life he'd wanted to be a Panther, to belong. Now . . .

He said, "Funny. Yuss runs the Panthers; all of a sudden he's boss."

"He gives the boys most of their money jobs," Doc said. "Like a politician who supplies jobs and is king shit."

Joe said, "You and Juan—how you pay the rent?"

Doc lifted his shoulders. "We can still heist a check out of a mailbox. But it's getting tougher all the time. Once in a while we pull a lush job. We got us a kid gun, black plastic, looks like a real .45. So far we pulled two heists on station agents."

"You crazy bastards."

Doc was sore. "What the hell did you want us to do!"

They didn't talk for a couple minutes. When the car reached Grand Street, Joe said, "You must know somethin' about Sade."

Doc shrugged. "How should I know?"

All of a sudden Juan was sore too. "Tell Joe, Doc. Sade belong to Frankie."

Joe cried, "You goddam Spik liar!"

Doc's voice was like a file on steel. "Listen to him, Joe. He's giving it to you straight."

"You're a goddam liar too! Let me out of this goddam car! You hear me? Let me the hell out!"

6.

JUAN pulled up on Essex and Delancey. Joe said, "What you guys tryin' to pull?" He got out, slammed the door closed. "My Sade?" He couldn't talk any more. Doc hollered something but he walked on, his knee burning like fire.

He stopped for a knish and root beer. The knish went down like lead, the drink was hot in his mouth.

Joe said to the guy behind the counter, "What the hell you sell here, piss water?"

"Don't buy next time," the man said.

Joe gave him the rest of the root beer right in his puss, then the knish. Some smart Turk behind the counter grabbed the man before he could hop over the counter. Joe wished to hell the Turk had minded his own business. He didn't know what had happened to his switch, maybe it was home, maybe Yuss's boys had kicked it out of his hip pocket, but with a wise guy like this Turk, he wouldn't need a knife. Joe'd just cut him to pieces with a broken glass. But there was no action, so Joe got out and walked around, limping like a cripple.

Stay away from her, stay away. But she's my Sade, my baby . . . all the time I know Doc and Juan's tellin' me

the God's honest truth. All the time, before they even opened up, I smelled it. . . .

Sade's house was a dirty yellow building over a monument store that had been going out of business for years. The hall smelled like all the cats in the neighborhood had had a ball for a week straight. The stairs had puddles, there was crap on every floor. You walked, splashed and slid. Joe knocked on her door, and a witch stuck her head out.

"Yeh?" It was Sade's old lady trying to see him in the dark.

Joe said, "Sade home?"

"Sade? Who is this?"

"Don't you know me, Mrs. Murphy? It's me, Joe Kusack."

"Joe?" He could see her jaw drop a yard. "No Sade, nobody."

She tried to close the door on him but he had a shoe inside. "Take it easy, Mom. I got to talk to Sade."

"You don't get your foot out the door, I'll call the police." She was getting excited. "My Sade's a good girl."

"Just let me talk to her."

"I'll call the police." A woman opened a door down the hall and came out, then a man. Sade's old lady said, "I don't want my Sade goin' with the likes of you."

Joe shoved the door, pushing her against the wall. She started screaming like Joe was going to rape her or something. He went through the house, the living room, the bedrooms, the kitchen. No Sade.

He limped back to the old lady. "You can shut y'asshole now."

All the way down the stairs people on the floors ducked

back in the house when they saw him. You'd think he had a dose or something. Upstairs the old lady'd stopped screaming.

Joe walked around for a long time and every once in a while he had to stop to rest his leg. He knew he should go home and get into bed for a while but he had to know, he had to hear it from Sade with his own ears.

Down the Panthers Club, the door was locked. Joe felt around in his pockets and sure enough he still had the key. Opening the door, he went inside. The room was dark and quiet, like a funeral parlor. He stood there, figuring maybe he should lay down on the couch for a couple hours.

He heard funny noises coming from behind the kitchen door. Somebody was laughing her head off. His pump banged away like anything. It was Sade. You couldn't miss her giggle. It was part of her, like her big ass.

He moved to the door which was open a crack, and stood there for a minute. Some guy was moaning and she started to giggle again. Joe kicked open the door with his good leg, pulled on the light. They were on the cot, Sade and Frankie, and she let out with a holler and grabbed a towel and held it over her like Joe was a stranger.

"You got a nerve," she said.

Frankie picked up his pants. "What do you want, Joe?"

What did he want!!

Joe said, "Just your balls, Frankie, that's all I want."

Joe grabbed a beer bottle from the shelf, broke off the bottom on the gas range. "I'm going to cut them off for you, Frankie."

Frankie backed away, reached inside his pants and all of a sudden he had his switch out. Now they were even.

Now they could really have fun. Joe moved in on the bastard. Frankie stepped away from the gas range.

"You're out, Joe," he said. "We don't need rats in this outfit."

"Yuss Wacks' outfit."

Sade cried, "Big shot Joe the Polack, always hittin'. Showin' off his money."

She didn't have the towel covering her any more. She didn't give a damn.

Joe felt sick to his belly. "You helped me spend the dough, Sade."

Frankie laughed. "Dumb Polack. You never did have a brain."

Joe said, "Sade told you. You told Yuss. You sigged her onto me, got her to pump me how I got my dough."

He circled around Joe, and it was hot and sticky. Frankie said, "Sade got the idea. She's smart."

She hurried off the bed, crouched behind Frankie. "No," she said, scared. "Yuss found out by himself."

Frankie hollered, "Don't crawl, Sade, not for this dumb Polack. He's nothing, just a piece of crap. We're big and we're gonna be bigger. Yeah, you dumb Polack, you told Sade, and I tipped off Yuss, and if anything happens to Sade or me, Yuss'll rip your heart out. Be smart. I'm givin' you a chance. Get out and stay out and I'll forget you pulled a broken beer bottle on me."

Joe shook his head, inched in on Frankie. "I got to kill you, I just gotta."

"All right, Joe," Frankie said. "Come and get it. Win or lose, you'll lose."

Joe kept coming, not giving a damn. He'd rip Frankie's belly open, and nothing would happen to Joe Kusack.

Frankie couldn't touch him, nothing could hurt him. Joe Kusack was Superman, his hide so powerful it broke knives, and bullets bounced off him like B-B shots.

Frankie's hand was shaking like Lepke the Epileptic who lay on the floor and spit all over himself.

Joe said, "I'm going to shove that blade down your throat."

Frankie's eyes opened wide and his head looked big as a medicine ball and his lips moved like he was gagging. Joe took a step and suddenly his bum knee gave out and he was down on the floor. He felt so weak. Maybe he should have stayed in the hospital a couple more days. Frankie stepped in fast, made a pass. Joe rolled against the bed, got up fast. They circled, panting, sweating.

"I gotcha, Frankie," Joe sang. "Gotcha good."

Then the roof came down on his head.

Somebody was shaking him but he couldn't open his eyes on account of the lids were pasted. He felt wet, like he'd made in bed. Lots of times Joe'd made in bed. All he had to do was dream he was making in the toilet and all of a sudden he'd wake up and he wasn't in the toilet. Boy, Mom used to get mad! Lately, Joe hadn't been doing it so he was sore at himself for starting that business all over again.

"C'mon, Joe, snap out of it."

He got his lids open but the rain knocked them closed.

"Doc," he said, "what'm I doin' out in the rain?"

Doc said, "You tell me. I been looking all over for you. I figured you went down the Club but I find you in this alley."

"You're always pickin' me up in some alley."

"This time you're not boozed up."

Doc helped Joe up. Joe wiped the wet from his eyes and looked up, and the rain ran down his face. "My goddam head hurts like hell." The rain was cold. "You see Frankie?"

"I don't wanna see Frankie. You think you can make it home?"

Up in the flat Joe plopped down on the bed. Every part of him hurt like he'd been run over by a truck.

Joe said, "Doc, you ever get runned over by a truck?"

Doc said, "Lemme get you stripped. You look sick."

"I once got runned over, when I was a kid. Six months in a lousy hospital, a goddam cast on each leg. Hey, Doc, remember Sam Levinson's joke? If you don't get killed by a truck, you wish you had after your old man got through bangin' you around."

Doc wiped Joe's face with a towel. "You're burning up." He pulled off Joe's pants and Joe started to shake all over. "I'm gonna get a doc."

Joe laughed. "Doc is gonna get a doc. I got dough."

"I know," he said.

"You frisk me?"

"I'm broke. The doc charges five for a visit. You want him or not?"

Joe said, "Doc, can't you take a joke? You know anythin' I got is yours."

"Now I know you got fever."

Joe lay there looking up at the ceiling. He watched it come down real close then move back up, like a magic carpet, and every once in a while the walls came out and met the ceiling. Real crazy.

No more Sade.

She was Frankie's girl now. Sonofabitch Frankie, Joe should have killed him. Only that bitch had to conk him out. She must have used a baseball bat or maybe she'd dropped that gas range on his head. Frankie was a big shot now. Bet him and Yuss slept together they were so goddam palsy-walsy.

And what are you, Joe? Nobody. And you got nothing, nothing but a trick knee. No job, no dough except for a couple tens, no Sade. Nobody and nothing, that's Joe the Polack. Like in the old days. . . . Your old man was nobody. A geek, a wino, a nobody. And you're nobody.

Joe buried his face in the pillow and had a crying fit so bad you'd think he had a jag on.

Every day the doc came. He gave Joe a shot in the hip and a bottle of yellow medicine to take three times a day. Joe ran out of money but his pal Doc didn't listen to him when Joe told him to stop the doc from coming. For a week the doc jabbed the big needle in him, collected seven bucks and beat it. Doc paid. Joe didn't ask questions. He knew Doc didn't disappear every night for a couple hours just to see his girl Dolly, not every night. Joe didn't ask and Doc didn't tell him anything. That was how it went.

After ten days, the doc let Joe off the bed. A couple days walking around and Joe was sick of the room. He had to get out. It was time he started making a buck. So while Doc was outside someplace Joe got dressed and went to see Lefty Damiano.

Joe walked all the way to Catherine Street on account of he had just six cents in his pocket. By the time he hit the East Broadway corner his knee was acting up again, so he sat down near a candy store, right on the curb. A

couple guys were shmoozing around so he asked them maybe they knew Lefty.

A fat guy with a barrel chest said, "He's gone up to Mars on a rocket."

Fatso thought he was dealing with a dope. Joe said, "You're full a crap. Since when they got rockets workin'?"

His friend said, "My old man takes a trip every time he gets high."

Joe rubbed his knee. "Somebody be a nice guy and tell Lefty Joe Kusack is askin' for him."

They watched him for a while, like he was a freak with earlaps and then the fat guy went for a walk. His friend puffed on a cigar until Joe began to drool.

"You wouldn't have a spare," Joe said.

He said, "These is coffin cigars, one in a box."

Real funny stuff, fifty years old. Something hit Joe on the side of the face and a cigar dropped in his lap.

"Thanks," Joe said like a real gentleman even if it was a lousy dime cigar.

"That's okay," he said. "I'd give any bum a smoke."

Joe took the wrapper off the cigar. Puffing on his stogie like a steam engine, the man watched Joe. Joe broke the cigar into a million pieces, dropped them in the gutter.

Joe said, "If I could get up I'd show you who's a bum."

The man laughed and moved away. Joe wished to hell he hadn't broken the cigar.

The fat guy came back. "C'mon," he said, like a real secret agent. Joe limped after him down the street, across the gutter, stopping in front of a pizza-pie joint. Fat boy showed Joe with his thumb. "In there."

Joe opened the door and went inside. He'd seen Lefty

once in his life, a fast look, but he had no trouble figuring out which one of the three pizza-pie gobblers was Lefty on account of the other two were Barney Silva and Paul Canella.

Lefty saluted. "C'mon, Joe, sit down. Hey, Woppy, another bottle and a pizza."

Joe swung over a chair from another table. The restaurant was a real small place but clean as a whistle, with white tablecloths and all. There was a big red wine spot in front of Silva's plate.

Lefty lifted a big chunk of pie, wolfed off a piece, the sides of his fat mouth and chin full of some kind of grease or oil. Lefty had a big face, like a heavyweight, but his body didn't look so big. He had one of them blue chins that never looks shaved. While he was eating, his big brown eyes was asking Joe, hey, boy? what's new?

Silva looked tougher than his boss. Maybe he wasn't so smart. Joe didn't know. Silva seemed hard as a rock, his puss all banged in as if somebody'd busted his nose and spread it around a little, then pushed it around a little bit more. His jaw was cockeyed like it'd been shoved to one side by a brick and stayed that way. His lips were full of scars that must've come from a million cuts.

Paul Canella sure was a mean-looking bastard, looking at Joe like he'd done him something and he was going to take it out of Joe's hide. Short, stocky, rough; that was Canella. He didn't smile, just looking at you out of green eyes full of hate. Joe would've bet his shirt that scar Canella sported on his left cheek was a present from a guy who didn't like the way Canella looked at him.

A bunch a creeps, the three of 'em.

Joe drank wine, sour and cool. The waiter brought a pie,

all cut in wedges. Joe dug in and when he'd finished wiped his mouth with his fingers. He just didn't feel like dirtying the nice clean napkin. Canella's lips twisted, like Joe was a slob or something.

Joe said, "You want to talk, Lefty?"

Silva said, "I got a date tonight."

Canella lit a cigarette. "That bag? You're better off with a fairy."

Joe said, "Lefty, how about it?"

Canella said, "You offerin' to take his girl's place?"

They all laughed, but Joe didn't think it was funny.

Lefty said, "Sorry, Joe. I know what's on your mind. I can't do a thing."

"What's on my mind, you know so much?"

"You're broke and you want work." The guy was good. Lefty said, "It figures. You had a soft job, pushing a car for me. You made dough. Now you're out of the hospital and want another job."

The guy knew everything. Joe said, "If you can't, you can't. That's all."

He said, "Right now I'd settle for the job you had."

Joe looked at him, trying to figure out what Lefty was talking about.

Silva said, "Your friend Yuss took care of all of us."

Joe spit on the floor. "My friend!"

Lefty squeezed Joe's arm. "We're still better off than Mike Shlepper."

"What happened to Mike?"

Canella sounded real sad. "They broke his legs, one at a time, then his arms, in three places, they banged his insides and they cut his face from ear to ear. Mike died in French Hospital."

Silva said, "Mike is dead and we're dying."

Joe didn't get it. "You had your crap games. They just blow out the window?"

Canella's mean puss looked a little meaner. "Just about, Buster. Yuss is on our tails. We got a game, Yuss smells us out and a goon squad breaks it up. Twice we got stickups. Yuss's boys rob us blind, bang hell out of our house men, break up the furniture. We're out of business fast. All on account of you."

Joe said, "Wait a minute."

Lefty waved Canella down. "It ain't the kid's fault. Maybe it was mine lettin' Mike use him. Maybe it'd been safer with one of our boys. Only we needed every man we could get. Maybe somebody tipped off Yuss. Maybe he got wise and put a tail on the kid, but no matter who was on the job Yuss woulda got us. So lay off Joe."

Canella said, "A couple more weeks and I gotta go back to heist jobs. Me, a nice respectable craps book going out on lousy heist jobs."

Silva looked up at the ceiling. "We could knock over a bank out in Queens and get us enough to go out to Las Vegas and buy a piece of a gambling joint."

Joe stared at them, three tough, hard guys acting like kids who'd got their lollies swiped. Maybe they needed somebody with brains to straighten them out.

Joe sneered. "I'd never take it on my back."

Lefty drank wine. Silva liked a blonde who'd just come into the joint. Canella grunted, "What would you do, kid?"

Joe was sore. "I'm no kid. A couple months and I'm twenty. Anyway, what's the diff how old? Twenty or fifty, you gotta have guts to stand up and fight."

Silva, still watching the fat blonde, said, "Maybe you talk too much. What would you do with your guts, big man?"

Joe played with the knife on the table. "Get rid of Yuss Wacks."

The way they smiled, the idea'd been played around with before.

Lefty said, "You got guts all right, guts and no brains."

"It's our guts he's usin'," Silva snapped.

Joe pleaded. "Just give me a chance and I'll show you I got guts too. What happens if you knock off Yuss; you guys strong enough to take over?"

Lefty counted his fingers, then counted them again. Silva was just dying to go over to the blonde; he was itching so bad he couldn't sit still.

Canella said, "Yuss ain't the whole mob. But knock off Yuss, and we got a foot inside. Get Big Mac, too, and we take over."

Lefty shook his head. "They're tough babies, but Yuss is half the mob. With him six feet under, I can take 'em, Big Mac or anybody. The worst could happen, with Yuss out we'd form a combine."

Joe said, "That ain't bad."

Canella said, "We knew all the answers before you stuck your Polack puss into this joint. Now tell us how we get to Yuss. His gun, Big Mac, is aces. And that second gun, the guy they call Skinny, is almost as good. Those guns can shoot buttons off a guy's vest. And Yuss's got eyes up his ass. So let's forget the whole business. You, Polack, forget you seen us. Lefty, I don't know why the hell we're even talkin' to this kid. So far Yuss ain't tried to rub us out. He gets wind a this . . ."

Lefty smiled. "You think Yuss is a dope? He knows if he was in our shoes, he'd be thinkin' of how to get rid of the opposition. Yuss knows and he's laughin' every time he thinks of us eatin' our hearts out."

Joe said, "You gotta make one try, win or lose."

Silva said, "Blast off, kid. Don't play games with our hide."

Joe snickered. "No guts."

They didn't get sore. Lefty said, "You do the job, you got so much guts. Tell you what. You point Yuss out to me when he's alone for a minute, half a minute, twenty seconds even, and I'll do the job. Now get out of here and stop knockin' me out."

7.

Joe had a hate for Yuss he'd never had for anybody, and when the weeks shot past and he couldn't figure out how to get Yuss knocked off the hate got worse and worse until he got sick to his belly every time he thought about it. Sometimes Joe wished he had a cannon so he could take a crack at Yuss himself. Boy, he'd sure be a big man. Joe the Polack knocking off Yuss Wacks. . . .

He sat in the flat and a million ideas popped in his head, but they stank. Joe figured out ways to draw the guards off Yuss, like grabbing their hats and spitting in their eye, so they'd chase him up on the roof, like they'd done with the Spik's girl when they'd staged a line-up. It sounded okay, till he wondered what would happen when they caught up to him. And suppose only one guard chased him?

Once he'd seen a movie where a dame got a guy to send his guard home. A girl like Sade could wiggle her ass and Yuss'd tell Big Mac and Skinny, go on beat it, I got me a piece, and then Sade would give the signal, like pulling down the shades, and Lefty and his boys would come upstairs and pump bullets into Yuss, big bullets, .45's. And Joe'd be right there, pumping too. First he'd kick Yuss's brains out, then he'd stand there and give Lefty the sign. No, he'd do it himself. Lefty wouldn't even have to show up. . . .

Joe took a walk to Catherine Street and gave Lefty the idea. Maybe he could get a girl, a real hot tomato with a tight sweater. Lefty looked at him like Joe was stupid. He'd seen the picture too. And even if Yuss had not, he was too smart.

So Joe went home again and walked the floor. It was driving him nuts. When Doc came home he always brought Joe a cigar or two. He'd tell Joe to go out for a walk or something, that he couldn't keep himself locked in a house day after day. But Doc didn't understand. He'd just keep talking until Joe would go into the bedroom and close the door.

One time Doc said, "Forget Yuss. We can make a good buck, you, me, Juan. We can make contact with a guy who's got a truck. I got a dozen television stores lined up. We can turn 'em off one at a time. Knocking off Yuss will get you roped into a murder rap. Killing a guy, Joe, ain't for us."

Joe hollered, "Who the hell's askin' you? You know how I feel? You ain't got my knee. You didn't get banged around till you're crippled. You didn't have no cushy job then lose it so you got to chisel eats and board and

smokes. If I could only get the bastard alone. With my own hands, I'd rip him to pieces."

Doc laughed. "Put on a dress and change your name to Rose Tocci."

Joe stared at him and something Doc had told him a long time ago ran crazy in his head.

"Doc, this Tocci broad, she and Yuss still muzzle around?"

Doc was trying to make out what Joe was driving at. "He always had a yen for her. She lives in my old man's building."

"I know. You told me how they used to go muzzlin' up on the roof."

"I don't know what they did on the roof. Rose's old lady didn't want them to get hitched, but he still goes up the house. I saw him last week."

"He don't take her out or nothin'?"

"What you talking about? He takes her out."

"His guards, they go along too?"

"Every time I saw Rose and Yuss, he had a guard."

"Up on the roof?"

"I haven't been up on the roof for years."

"The last time you seen them?"

"Big Mac sat on the steps just outside the roof door."

Joe's insides banged around. "Any special day Yuss goes up on the roof?"

"Will you tell me what this is about?"

"Doc, for Chris' sakes, just tell me."

"For all I know they don't go up to the roof any more."

"And maybe they do, when it's hot. . . ."

Doc looked like he had a headache. "Mostly Friday

nights, that's when I used to see them. Joe, listen to me."

Joe didn't listen, running like a thief, bum knee and all, down the steps, out into the street.

He found Lefty in the Italian restaurant. For a change Lefty was eating again. Barney Silva and Paul Canella didn't look so happy when Joe walked in. Joe grabbed a chair and spilled out the story to Lefty, who kept eating his lasagna, not saying anything till he pushed his plate away and leaned back in his chair.

"I don't know," Lefty said. "There's too many ifs. If they still go up on the roof. If he still takes her out. If it's on Friday night. If Big Mac is deaf. How about the other guard? Where's he hang out while Big Mac sits on the steps?"

Canella didn't like the setup. "Too dangerous. We knock Yuss off, we got two guards to worry about. And how the hell we gonna get down from the roof?"

Joe said, "You got six tenements runnin' side by side down Broome Street. You do the job, you got six halls, six doors leadin' to the street. And every buildin's got a back yard and a lot of fences."

"I don't like it," Canella said.

Joe was burning up. "You guys chicken?"

Silva wolfed down some ravioli. "Shut y'hole. This kid is a screwball, Lefty. Chase him the hell outa here."

Lefty fooled around with a toothpick. "It might work if we get the breaks."

Joe cried, "Now you're talkin'!"

"Shut up," Silva said again. "You'll bury me, sure as hell."

Lefty said, "We gotta case the job."

Joe chuckled. "That's for me. I could hide on the roof

across the street where I can see Rose Tocci's buildin' good."

Canella belched. "We do our own case jobs."

Joe slapped the table. "I'm gonna be on this. I gotta. Lefty, I just gotta have a piece of it."

Lefty laughed. "You're a crazy kid."

"He'll bury us," Silva said again. "That's all the bastard's got on his mind. Get rid of him, Lefty."

Joe leaned on the table. "Some guy I know's got a pigeon coop across the street. I go up there Friday night, raise pigeons and keep my eyes peeled."

Lefty looked at Joe like he was a freak with two heads. "Who raises pigeons at night?"

Joe said, "You never seen pigeons flyin' round at night?"

"It's no good," Canella said, showing his teeth. "You'd attract attention. Yuss'd see you and smell a rat. And we don't want your pigeon friend to know you was in the neighborhood."

This guy thought of everything.

Joe said, "Okay, I can hide behind the coop."

Lefty looked at the ceiling. Silva had worries, the way he sat looking at nothing. Canella whistled but nothing came out.

Joe shouted, "What the hell you got to lose?"

"It's a long shot," Lefty said.

Joe said, "I'm takin' the chance."

Silva looked sick. "You blow the job, Yuss comes after us. I don't like it, Lefty."

Canella said, "Me too. But we're dyin' by inches. Yuss is killin' us the slow, hard way. We gotta make it or break it."

It was so goddam quiet, Joe could hear his belly gurgling. Everybody looked at Lefty, who scratched his chin, pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped oil from his fat face. The guy looked scared. Big-shot Lefty Damiano. Joe had to laugh.

Lefty looked up fast. He didn't like the way Joe laughed. He didn't like what Joe was thinking.

Lefty said, "We must do somethin'. . . . You go ahead, Joe. Let's see how it shapes up. Find out if Yuss still likes to muzzle up on the roof on Friday night. If he does, where's his guards hang out. . . ."

Joe could hardly wait till Friday. Like somebody was pushing him, he walked around the flat figuring, all the time figuring. Doc wanted to know what'd got into him. Joe blew his top and told Doc why the hell didn't he mind his own goddam business. Joe told him nothing on account of he didn't want Doc trying to talk him out of it. One nervous guy in the family was plenty.

Friday night, around nine, Joe hustled up to the Broome Street roof, across from Rose Tocci's building. He sat down against the coop from where he could see the even-numbered buildings. It was a warm night, warm and nice.

He sat there and time didn't move. It was 9:30. Joe listened to his wrist watch, shook it, but it didn't go any faster. It was ten and then 10:05. A guy could go nuts by himself. By ten-thirty Joe had a feeling it was the wrong night. Or maybe Yuss didn't hang out on the roof any more. Or maybe he and Rose were on the outs. Or maybe —yeah, maybe somebody had tipped him off. All of a sudden it got so cold, Joe shivered. He pulled his legs up under him but it didn't get any warmer.

The roof door opened and a girl came out. She looked

like Rose Tocci but the moon wasn't light enough for Joe to be sure. Then a big guy with a little beard. Him Joe could recognize in the dark. All of a sudden it got so hot Joe's shirt pasted to his body. Yuss came out and Joe stopped breathing. Maybe Yuss could hear him, maybe Big Mac could see him with his big eyes. Joe got flat on his belly, worked himself around the coop. The pigeons started raising a racket and Joe didn't move, he was so scared Yuss could hear him from way across the street.

After a while Joe looked up and there was no Big Mac. Then on the next roof, sitting on the girder which held up the empty water tank, somebody lit up and Big Mac's big face was puffing life in a butt. Joe watched Yuss light up and slip one butt in Rose Tocci's mouth. Joe dropped to his belly, slid around to the roof door and went half down a flight of stairs before standing up.

Joe stopped short, his heart jumping up in his mouth. Watching Joe like he was a screwball, Pinky Adelstein, the guy who owned the pigeons, stood there, his big mouth open.

Joe said, "Hi, Pinky. I thought maybe you was goin' to raise the birds and I wanted to watch."

Pinky didn't know what to believe. "I hardly never raise 'em at night. You wanna see?"

Joe said, "Some other time, Pinky. I just remembered I got a date with a broad, a nice piece of mahoska."

Pinky drooled. "Fix me up sometime. . . ."

By the time Joe got down to the street, his brain was working again. He stopped to think. Had he forgot something? He had to show Lefty he was no dope doing a slop job. He looked at his watch. It was 10:50. Yuss must have

come up on the roof between 10:40 and 10:43, Big Mac and Rose just seconds before him. Big Mac had sat on the other roof.

What about Yuss's other guard?

His knee did tricks like it was rubber as he crossed the gutter and went up Rose Tocci's building. Fast, before he could change his mind, he climbed up to the fifth floor, stood there, puffing like a steam engine. He had to play it safe. Blow it now and he might as well jump off a bridge.

He took a step, waited a couple seconds, moved up one step more. He knew the stairs layout. In every tenement it was about the same. There was a flight of eight steps from the fifth floor, then a piece of landing, a turn, another five steps to the roof.

Joe saw the shoes, shiny black. The guy was tapping out a rhythm or something. Joe couldn't see his face. Two guards, one on the other roof, one on the steps just off the roof. . . .

This time Joe found Lefty on the corner with six other guys. When Lefty saw Joe, he broke away, Silva and Canella right behind him. They went up to Lefty's flat on Madison Street and all the way up, Lefty was the most worried-looking bastard you ever saw.

Lefty mixed some drinks before he'd even listen to Joe, then sat down on a club chair, and the way he looked Joe would have bet his pants the sonofabitch was hoping they couldn't go after Yuss.

Canella said, "You look happy, Joe."

Silva drank, said nothing.

Three big guys scared of their shadows.

Joe gave it to them, every bit of it, then he set it up so they should get no headaches figuring things out.

Joe said, "You three could pull the job. Two up on the roof. One takes care of Big Mac. You gotta kill him or he'll come after you. The other guy knocks off Yuss. You gotta time it right to do both jobs the same second. The third guy takes the guard on the stairs. I seen it in the movies a million times: You set your watches and knock off three bastards on the zero second. It ain't tough."

Canella was sore for a change. "Will you shut y'Polack hole? Don't needle us. Three guys for three killin's."

Joe said, "Use six, use ten."

Lefty said, "The less the better. We'll have to make a getaway and I don't want it lookin' like the army's retreatin'."

Joe said, "You gotta use silencers or you'll have the whole street up your ass."

Canella said, "This kid knows all the answers. Let us figure out a few by ourselves."

Joe cried, "For crying out loud, what do you want? I give you a perfect setup—"

Lefty said, "It ain't perfect enough. What about the girl?"

Joe stared. *The girl?*

Lefty said, "I don't wanna knock off no dame. And we got trouble if she starts hollerin' cops."

Joe shouted, "You gonna let a lousy broad stand in your way?"

Canella spat. "Shut up, for Chris' sakes."

Joe told him, "Shut up y'self. You don't scare me. I

want you should kill Yuss. I don't care who else gets killed as long as Yuss is dead."

Lefty said, "Joe, go back next week—"

"What for we gotta wait another goddam week?"

"We ain't in a hurry. I been on a job where I spent six months casin'. We got plenty time."

"Maybe you got!" Joe hollered. "I ain't."

Silva begged, "Please, Lefty, chase him."

Lefty's lips tightened. "Then what?"

Silva said, "Lemme die without listenin' to this creep."

Joe got up. "You're a creep, not me. Chicken, the lot of you."

Lefty lifted a hand. "Listen to me, Joe, listen good. Tail Yuss from the time he reaches this girl's house till the time he leaves, all the way. Understand? No half-ass jobs. Especially, find out what happens when the girl goes downstairs. Who goes first, Yuss or the girl or Mac or who? Watch every move. If the broad goes first, how long before Yuss and Big Mac leave? Or do Yuss and his broad go down together?"

Joe had a headache. "You talk so fast, you mix me up."

"Do like I say, Joe. Time it from the minute Yuss goes in the buildin' up to when he leaves. . . ."

The next week Joe waited in the hallway across the street. He watched Yuss and his hoods get out of the Caddy and go upstairs, first the skinny guy, then Yuss, then Big Mac. It was 9:10. He went up on the roof and sat by the coop like the last time. He was jumpy as hell and by the time ten o'clock rolled around he was ready to bust. At a quarter after ten, Big Mac stepped on the roof, looked around. Seconds later came Yuss, then Rose

Tocci. Joe was all tight inside. This was how it was the last time. . . .

All of a sudden the sky exploded and the rain came down in buckets. Goddam lousy rain. Big Mac, the girl and Yuss beat it off the roof. Joe looked up at the sky and cursed his head off. He was soaked by the time he got off the roof.

During the next week Joe was sick as a dog. Now he had weather to worry about! But this time when he returned to Broome Street things worked nice and smooth. Hell, he wasn't even scared. Not much, anyway. He watched downstairs, and up on the roof till they left at eleven o'clock, then he hung over the roof till, ten minutes later, Yuss and his goons piled into the Caddy and rolled away. Now they were set for the job.

But he didn't know Lefty Damiano.

Lefty listened, he and his chicken gang, and said, "Okay, the girl goes downstairs. Then Yuss finishes his butt. He whistles and Big Mac joins him and they leave. Fine. Case 'em next week."

Joe exploded. "Again? You pullin' your puddin' or somethin'?"

"We got to be sure. We're playin' with our lives, so what's a couple more weeks? The girl goes downstairs, Yuss finishes the butt and whistles. How long between the girl leavin' and the whistle?"

"Half a minute."

"Let's be sure. Next time he might not have a cigarette to finish. Then what? We got to know."

"Last time!" Joe hollered. "So help me, this is the last time. I'm gonna die of a heart attack. . . ."

But it wasn't the last time. Joe went back the next week

and it worked the same way, except that this time Yuss lit a butt when she left and he whistled for Mac to join him and after a minute they went down. The way Joe figured it, Yuss had given her a chance to get into her house before he went parading through the hall with his gunsels.

Lefty had plenty time, so Joe had to go back the week after. Only it rained again. The week after that it was fair and warm but Yuss didn't even show up. Another week, and Joe was half dead, eating himself up inside. He chewed cigars, spit out the tobacco and waited week after week.

It was July before Lefty was satisfied he could pull the job.

Lefty said, "I've got the timin' down pat, but like I said, we gotta get all the breaks. Once we walk up on that roof, there's no punking out. We get him and his guards or they get us."

Joe said, "Let me in on it. I can hide up by the coop and give you the signal when Yuss comes up."

"Uh-uh," Lefty said. "We got it planned. Barney will be up on the pigeon-coop roof."

"I'm in this too!" Joe hollered. "I can handle a cannon."

Canella snapped. "Crazy kid, we don't want you near that buildin'. We can't take chances. They don't know us. You come from that neighborhood and somebody you know is liable to spot you."

Joe begged him. "Just let me watch. Please, I gotta."

"No," Lefty said, and when Joe hopped up from his chair, "Damn it, I said no. You did your share. That's enough. You stay home and read about it in the papers. Once we get rid of Yuss, Joe, you'll be a real big guy. No job's gonna be too good for you in our organization. Now

don't louse us up. Joe, don't come near Broome Street. . . ."

8.

A guy can go nuts in a week. The pain can rip your belly apart, waiting day after day, every hour, every goddam minute. Something sour pulls at your throat and you've got to keep walking. Just sit down for a minute and your leg jerks like when the doc hits your knee with a hammer, and your eye twitches like crazy and you rub and rub the eye and you can't stop that goddam twitch. You can't eat, you can't sleep, waiting, waiting. . . .

Then it's Friday again and you look out the window and when you see the red sun beating down, you breathe a little easier. At least you don't have to wait another week. If you had to do that, you'd never make it. So it's Friday morning, ten o'clock, then eleven, then, like a year later, twelve. You got all afternoon to jive around the floor and your belly feels so tight and empty it hurts.

Doc came up with a pastrami sandwich. Joe took one bite and it stuck in his throat so that he had to spit it out or choke. Doc stared but said nothing. Doc went out again and a couple minutes later Juan came looking for Doc. Joe could tell by the way Juan's eyes rolled he needed a fix, and ten to one he was looking for Doc to fill out one of them prescription blanks so he could get some H. Couple weeks back, for an extra five, Juan had got a doctor to give him a prescription for some medicine with enough H in it to do the trick. Then when Juan

busted into a doctor's office and swiped a pad of prescription blanks, all he had to do was write the same thing on each piece of paper, and for a fair price he could keep himself supplied. Doc made out the prescription for Juan because Doc had a nice handwriting.

When it started getting dark, Joe got out of the house.

It was after nine when he ducked into a hallway on Broome Street, half a block from Rose Tocci's house. He couldn't get too close. Lefty or his boys or Yuss might see him. Joe was in the hall one minute when the Caddy pulled up to Rose's building. Funny, he hadn't seen the car come around the corner. All of a sudden he'd looked up and it was there.

Like always, Yuss and his two guards came out, Yuss in the middle, and they went into the building. Half a minute later another car came up the street, passed the Caddy, parked a couple doors away. Joe felt real good when three guys got out, a fourth guy sitting at the wheel. Lefty Damiano, Barney Silva and Paul Canella broke, disappeared, each up a different building.

They'll get Yuss, shoot him down like a goddam dog, Yuss and his guards. And I'll stand right here and watch Lefty and Barney and Paul pile into the car and go away and I'll walk through the streets singing.

Just thinking how the slugs would rip through Yuss's eyes gave Joe a kick, a funny, electric kind of sensation right between his legs.

Joe wanted to go up on the roof and hide behind that pigeon coop but he was scared maybe Yuss'd see him and smell a rat. He couldn't take a chance, not when everything was running like silk.

It was 9:30.

Joe lit a cigar, a lousy fifteen-center. Soon he'd smoke Corona-Coronas. When Lefty took over Yuss's mob, Joe was in. Joe Kusack, the dumb Polack, would be a big mogul. And he'd take care of Doc and Juan, his pals. Hell, they could be his guards. Nah—what for did he need guards?

And he'd take over the Panthers, that was for sure.

All his life he'd wanted to be leader, run a mob, even a small one like the Panthers. He'd be big then, big as anything, everybody bowing like he was a king, nobody laughing. . . .

9:45.

The cigar smoke hurt his throat but he kept smoking on account of he couldn't stop. Doc's old man came down the street and went into his building, Rose Tocci's building. Joe thought if after Lefty knocked off Yuss he just happened to let his piece go off while he was running down the stairs and the old man got a slug in the gut, Joe'd go running to Doc, hey, Doc, your old man got it too, your old man and Yuss, stiff like boards. Doc'd like that.

Kids walked past, kicking tin cans. They crossed the gutter, stopped to look over Yuss's car. One of the kids climbed up on the hood, up on the car, and did a dance. Then he jumped off and they kept walking. One of the boys picked up a stick and carried it on his shoulder like it was a boulder.

9:55.

A cop came up the street swinging his club. Joe ducked back in the hall and stayed there for a couple minutes. Somebody came down the stairs and Joe looked away,

hiding his face. The footsteps came nearer and nearer and stopped and all of a sudden Joe was scared stiff. Maybe it was Yuss. Maybe he'd hopped over the roof. Clear across the gutter?

The steps went by him. It was a man in dungarees. Joe held his watch to his ear. The goddam time didn't move. Maybe the watch had stopped. He started to count seconds. One, two, three . . . After one hundred, he looked at the watch. One minute, one lousy minute.

10:10.

He couldn't stand still, walking up and back in the hall. If only he was up on the roof . . . That was it. He had to be up there, he had to watch. If he ducked behind the coop. . . .

The scream came from way over his head. For a split second he thought Lefty had screwed things up and Rose was hollering her brains out. *Give it to her, Lefty. Shut her goddam hole!* . . .

He stepped out, looked up, and this big bundle was coming down, coming right at him, like he was under an elevator dropping a mile a minute. He covered his head. The bundle was still screaming. There was a loud noise, like a truck running into a wall and the screaming stopped. Joe looked. The bundle was spread out in the gutter, a long bundle with arms and legs sticking out funny.

He stood there staring and the feeling came up from his thighs and down from his belly and it met in the middle. In his whole life Joe'd never got such a kick.

People came running from out of the sidewalk and up from the gutter and some old lady was screaming like she'd got a whistle stuck in her trap. Running, hollering,

crying people, kids. Joe pushed his way into the mob. He had to look. He had to see Yuss in pieces. He had to see his brains coming out like crap.

One of the legs was under his back, like it had snapped off; the other leg was away over like he'd done a split. The arms were over his head and Joe could see the dirty hands. The head was smashed in, blood and a lot of gray stuff all over the gutter. The face wasn't even banged up, no scratch, no blood, no nothing.

Joe was sick as a dog. As he fought his way out of the mob, his knee buckled like it was caving in but he kept going. Some witch was laughing and crying at the same time. Near the corner his stomach did tricks. His knee turned and Joe went down, getting his head over the curb just in time. He lay there like a drunk, like his goddam old man, and like Pop'd done, threw up his guts.

He heard people all around him, saw shoes and feet, heard the police siren, so loud he got a pain in his ear. He pushed himself up, stood there on rubber legs. Faces, all screwed up, went past like in a dream, Frankie's face, Shlemie's. He leaned against a building and all of a sudden started to cry, like a crazy goddam kid pissing tears.

He made it home all right and climbed into bed, shoes and all. He was glad Doc was out muzzling with his Dolly. He didn't want Doc to see him crying and sick. He didn't want Doc asking a lot of dopey questions.

LEFTY, YOU CRAZY BASTARD, YOU SCREWED THINGS UP GOOD. YOU WAS SUPPOSED TO KNOCK OFF YUSS AND INSTEAD YOU GOT YOURSELF SHOVED OFF THE ROOF. AND THAT SONOFABITCH YUSS IS STILL ALIVE.

Joe had some crazy dreams, guys falling out of planes, bouncing off the pigeon coop like rubber balls, then

chasing him. They had split skulls and blood running out of a hole, and Joe jumped up and grabbed the blanket and covered his head. Then it was morning and he woke up sweating like a pig, and crawled out of bed.

Where was Doc? All night he'd been alone. Maybe it was Doc who'd fallen off the roof. Joe went into the living room, found Doc on the couch, and in the corner under the window, Juan. The Spik must have had a scrap with his old man for a change. Juan's arm was straight out and the skin was pimply red and full of holes. Joe could see the red spot where Juan'd got his last shot.

Joe got back into bed and lay there looking up at nothing. The next thing he knew Doc was standing over him, asking was he sleeping.

Joe sat up and rubbed his face hard. He hadn't shaved for three days and didn't feel like shaving.

Doc said, "I figured you might be hungry. Juan's going down for sandwiches."

Joe said, "I ain't hungry."

"I'll tell him to get you a ham and swiss."

Joe didn't answer so Doc went out. He could hear Doc talking, Juan answering, the door opening, closing.

His wrist watch said 10:30 when Juan returned. With his goddam *arriba* and *saludos,* you'd think he'd been away a year.

Joe went into the living room where Juan was reading the morning *News.*

In the toilet Joe sat until Doc stuck his head in. "You fall in, Joe? Coffee's gettin' cold."

Joe hollered, "Lay off me, for Chris' sakes, lay off it."

Doc said, "Okay, if you like piss coffee."

When Joe came out, they were sitting by the table, fin-

ishing up their sandwiches. The coffee containers had been squeezed like they'd got out the last drop. They didn't say anything when Joe sat down and bit into his sandwich. Ham and swiss was his favorite, but this goddam sandwich!

Joe said, "They put sand in it?" He drank some coffee. "Cold like ice!" They still weren't talking. Joe said, "You guys got somethin' on your mind, spill it out."

Doc said, "Maybe you oughtta do the spittin', Joe."

The words came out like nothing. "That Lefty screwed it up good."

Doc blinked. "I was hopin' you weren't in on that deal, but you hadda be."

Joe said, "Nobody knows I was in on it, nobody but you and Juan. You shoulda seen it, Doc. You shoulda—"

Juan flipped over the *News*. "Papers full of it. Look, Joe."

Joe saw the big black words. TWO KILLED IN NEW GANG WAR.

Joe dropped his sandwich. "They get Silva or Canella?"

Doc said, "Yuss got two bullets. Then somebody pushed Lefty off the roof or maybe he slipped. That's how the cops got it figured."

Joe's hands shook so much he ripped the paper. Yuss was dead, Yuss and Lefty. The cops got Rose Tocci to talk. She and Yuss, Rose said, had gone up on the roof and, after a couple cigarettes, she had gone down. That was all. She hadn't seen anything, she hadn't heard anything. She and Yuss had been alone up on the roof, she swore. Nobody else, no guard, nobody. The cops weren't buying her story so they'd taken her downtown.

Doc said, "The cops also got Big Mac and Skinny Johnson, Yuss's guards. She must've opened up."

"Where?" Joe said. "I don't see nothin' in the paper."

Juan said, "Juan hear it good on radio in sandwich place."

Joe took a walk around the room. His hands stopped shaking and he felt good again.

SONOFABITCH YUSS WAS DEAD!

Joe said, "This is it, fellers. We can't muff it." They just looked. Doc, the smart guy and the cokey Spik. Joe said, "We can take over the Panthers, me, you, Juan. That bastard Frankie'll crap in his pants with Yuss gone. We can chase him the hell out. Don't you get it?"

Doc had worries. "Yuss is dead but Big Mac is still alive."

Some of these smart guys you had to talk to like they were babies. "Big Mac is in the can. By the time he gets out we'll be runnin' the Panthers. We'll be ready to do business with Big Mac. You think Mac gives a damn who runs the Panthers, me or Frankie?"

Doc said, "If only we had somebody to back us up."

Joe said, "Doc, listen to a dumb Polack for a change. What the hell you got to lose? Juan, you hate Frankie's guts, you always have."

Juan licked his lips and he had a shine in his eyes like he'd just this minute got a charge. "Hate him real bad, Joe. Juan ready."

Doc shook his head. The sonofabitch was chicken. "Frankie, in case you'd like to know, has a .38-caliber revolver. It might so happen he'll have it on his person. Frankie's no dope, Joe. He knows Yuss is dead and Mac is in prison. He might be expecting you."

Joe grabbed Juan's arm. "You once had a zip."

"No," Doc said. "Let's not start a war."

Juan was on Joe's side. "Juan go home, get piece. We kill Frankie like dog."

Doc's face had a twitch. "A .38 is bigger, six bullets to one."

Joe laughed. "Frankie sees the zip, he turns green. I know Frankie. Doc, you with us or agin' us?"

"I don't know, Joe."

"Punk out now and for the rest of your life you'll do muggin's and two-bit stick-ups."

"It's an awful chance."

"I'm goin', Doc, me and Juan, with you or alone."

Juan said, "Come, Doc."

Joe cried, "Doc, you can't sit on no fence."

Doc looked sick. "Okay . . ."

9.

They waited downstairs for Juan to get his zip gun. He gave Joe a fast look at it before Doc hollered for him to stick it in his pants. Some gun, wood, a nail, a hunk of pipe and a lot of rubber bands. But it could shoot a .22. . . .

They walked across Clinton Street and Joe's heart was banging away. Not that he was scared. Those punks never could scare Joe. But he kept thinking, Joe, you're going to be the leader. What you wanted, what you prayed for, will come true. Big time, Joe, you and Mac.

He told the Spik, "You keep your eyes on Frankie. He

don't draw, you don't. I can handle that cokey bastard. He goes for his rod, you draw fast."

Juan laughed. "I let Frankie shoot first."

Joe blinked. The bastard must have had a charge, talking like a bebop.

Joe nodded. "He draws, you shoot to kill."

Doc said, "What if somebody else has a cannon and draws?"

Joe wondered why he hadn't thought of that. They stopped outside the clubroom.

Joe said, "Why should anybody draw if he's my pal?"

Doc looked up at the black sky. "What pal?"

"My pals. Them guys down there . . ."

Doc said, "You mean Frankie's pals? Shlemie, Lippy—"

"All right, all right, don't be no smart guy. Anybody draws on us, he gets it. Let's go down there and find out what the goddam score is."

Joe kicked open the door and they stood there for a couple seconds. Joe knew it looked good. Lots of times he'd seen it in the pictures and he'd always got a kick out of a guy surprising the hell out of punks, just like he was doing now. They had a nice crowd tonight. Frankie and Shlemie were standing against the wall, Sade and Doc's girl Dolly right in front of them. Lippy was on the couch with a brand-new redhead. The Dorfman brothers were hopping around, hollering and singing with a couple broads Joe'd never seen before. Six new guys, around seventeen or so, had broads in their arms; it looked like they were doing a mambo before they'd got paralyzed. The radio was blasting away.

It stank in the room, the heat hanging like in the Turkish Baths.

Joe looked Frankie in the eye and Frankie looked right back and everybody was dumb. Joe walked in, right across the floor, shoved Cheesy Dorfman away, shut the radio. Cheesy didn't say anything. He and Artie just looked. Juan came right to Joe's side as Doc slammed the door closed hard, like they'd planned it. When they mugged a guy they'd beat the hell out of him to put the fear of God in his soul. Doc had slammed the door to give the same effect, to show the boys they could work over a guy if they had to.

Joe said, "Hi, fellers, what's the word? Gettin' much, Shlemie? Hey, Lip, how's business?"

Shlemie gave Frankie a fast look. "Can't kick, Joe."

Lippy said, "Hey, Juan, where you hidin' out these days?"

Juan said, "You no care if Juan hide in sewer."

Joe said, "Sure he cares, Juan. Lip is your friend. You got your customer back, Lip. Buy from your pals, I say. Right, Juan?"

"No!" the Spik hollered. Joe couldn't figure him out. What was he sore about?

Sade couldn't look at him, not that Joe gave a damn. For all he cared she could drop dead. Her eyes came up, rested on his mouth. She'd always had that cute trick of looking like you were her next customer. Dolly came away from Sade and like she was sleep-walking moved over to Doc. He turned his back to her. She touched his shoulder.

"Don't be mad at me, Lenny, please, don't."

Doc said like he was busting, "I asked you to stay out of here."

"Every day—I waited—you didn't come. And I was so lonesome."

"Everybody gets lonesome. What the hell you want me to do, hire a band to follow you around?"

Joe figured, the hell with this crap. The way Sade was looking, she was ready for business. He went to her and he could feel eyes making holes in his back. Joe reached out, touched her arm, her shoulder, the back of her neck.

He said, "I'm back, baby, what happened is past. Me and you, baby, we can get together again. Well? Say somethin', for Chris' sakes, open your goddam mouth and say somethin'."

Her lips moved. "What should I say, Joe? I'm Frankie's girl."

"Screw Frankie!" he cried. "It's me now, me, Joe Kusack."

Frankie opened his toilet. "Why get tough, Joe? Okay, so Yuss is dead and you wanna come back to the Panthers. It wasn't me who ordered you out so I'm glad to see you back."

He gave Frankie a smile, two cents' worth. "I'll be with you in a minute, pal. Just don't stick your nose in my family fights. . . . What you say, Sade? I got a yen that's rippin' me apart. I need you bad."

She was ready to bust out with the tears. "Can't you find somebody else to bang around?"

He grabbed her arm, steered her to a corner. "We got a lot of people listenin' . . . I wanna give you love, baby. Love, from me to you. No more beatin's, so help me."

The tears ran over. "You don't know what love is. Hit is all you know. Kiss one minute, hit the next. I'm sorry,

Joe." His fist was a rock he wanted to ram down her mouth. "You wanna hit me, Joe. Go on, hit."

Frankie was at his elbow. "Enough a that, Joe. I don't want trouble."

Joe turned on him. "You don't want trouble? Why, you cokey sonofabitch, you started it all, openin' your rat mouth to Yuss, gettin' me chased, then takin' my Sade."

He didn't look so good. "What you want, Joe? You come down here, shove your weight around. You must want somethin'."

"Yeah," Joe said. "I want to kick as many teeth out of your rat mouth, I got kicked out of mine."

"Don't start nothin' you can't finish."

Joe took a fistful of jacket and shirt and pulled him close. He felt real bebop. Hell, he was tough, the toughest bastard in the world.

Joe said, "I'm startin' and I'm finishin'. For your information I'm takin' over, Frankie. You ain't runnin' the Club no more. I am. You don't like it, go cryin' to Yuss. He's stretched out in Zion's Undertakin' Parlor."

He was the sickest-looking bastard. "Somebody ain't gonna like it."

"Who? Big Mac? You think he's gonna give a damn who does business with him? Who the hell gave you brains, your cockroach old man? Yeah, you got a cockroach for an old man, a drunken lousy cockroach who made people laugh at him."

Joe felt so damn hot, sick. It wasn't Frankie's old man he was talking about. It was his own. And he couldn't figure why he was thinking of his goddam old man now.

He shoved Frankie to the door. "Go on, beat it." When Frankie didn't move so fast, Joe slapped him on the

mouth. "Out, you no-good bastard. How would you like the boys to cockalize you right in front of these broads?"

Some of the girls gave a squeal, which said, "Please do."

Juan growled. "Like what they done to Juan." He came over, pulled Frankie's coat. "Dirty Spik, spit on him! Remember, dog?"

Frankie backed away, the Spik after him. Frankie took one look behind him, and all of a sudden bolted to the kitchen. Joe got the setup and so did Juan. In a couple seconds, Frankie stepped back into the room, a big shiny .38 in his fist, but Juan was waiting plastered against the wall. As Frankie went past, Juan shoved the zip gun against the back of Frankie's head.

The witches really squealed now, some scared, some just excited. Before Joe had a chance to stop them, one of the girls pulled open the door and four Debs and two Juniors bolted. Joe slammed the door closed. The guys flattened against the wall. Lippy tried to bury himself behind the couch. Dolly stood near Doc, shivering like she had the flu.

Shlemie didn't move. "A lousy zip," he told Frankie. "Them .22's couldn't kill a pigeon."

Joe said, "It could make a nice hole in Frankie's head. Drop it, Frankie, drop it or he plugs you."

Juan was breathing hard. "Now, Joe, now I give him. Remember Nancy, Frankie, remember? Remember how you spit on Juan, you, Frankie, I kill. . . ."

"No," Joe said. "No killin' if he drops the cannon."

Frankie said, "You want the Club, you got it."

Joe sneered. "Betcha sweet ass I got it."

Frankie shoved his gun inside his belt. "He wants to shoot, let him shoot. I'm walkin' out with the rod."

Joe said, "Let him go, Juan."

Frankie moved to the door. "It's time I tied up with another gang, a bigger mob than the Panthers."

Joe laughed. "Sure, Frankie. Let me know so we can have real rumbles, with live cannons and all."

Frankie's lips curled. "That's your speed, Joe. You goin', Shlemie?"

Shlemie gave Joe such a look he wanted to belt him one. Shlemie said, "Sure, Frankie."

Lippy said, "Wait for me, Frankie."

Joe spat on the floor. "Go on, all you punks should stick together. Anybody else wants to beat it, don't let me stop him. Everybody stayin' is on my side. I'll show you how to make a real buck. Go with Frankie and you'll get crabs."

Frankie's sewer opened again. "Who's comin' with me?"

Joe couldn't help it. He had to bust him, a back-handed slap across his lip that split it open. The blood looked good running down Frankie's chin. Joe moved in again. He had to. . . .

Frankie reached for his cannon the same second Doc grabbed Joe's arm. Doc said, "Let him go. You want to draw, Frankie?"

Frankie looked at Juan, changed his mind. "Okay," he said. "Okay, Joe."

The Dorfman brothers moved to Frankie's side, first Cheesy and a second later, Artie. A couple of the debs and all the new kids backed Frankie up.

Doc cried, "Wait a minute, fellers. . . . Joe, you can't let 'em go."

"Let them!" Joe hollered. "Who needs them? Sade?' She went past him. He tried to grab her arm, missed. "Sade, stick around, please, baby. . . ."

She said, "I'm Frankie's girl, Joe, I always was."

Then they went out and Joe's heart was a hunk of lead. For a couple seconds it was dead quiet, then Doc started to laugh. Joe shouted what's the goddam joke? Doc had tears in his eyes as he pointed. There were four Debs and three Juniors left. Everybody else had gone with Frankie . . . even Dolly. After one dirty look from Doc, she'd walked out crying and Doc looked like the world had blown up.

Doc laughed like he was choking. "All we got left are Panther cubs. For Chris' sake, Joe, what do we do now?"

10.

Every once in a while Joe went down to the Club hoping some of the Panthers had come back, but those crazy bastards were just plain stupid, running around with Frankie and the new mob they had tied up with, the Rivals, strictly semi-pro. All Joe had were kids in his gang, and every day a couple more joined up. Sure he could wait maybe three years and, after he'd shown them the ropes, he'd have a real outfit, but who could wait three years. He needed big action now, and snotnose kids, twelve years or thirteen, had no guts and no brains for real big-time jobs.

Joe'd be better off waiting for Big Mac to come out of the can, then he could ditch the Panthers and tie in with

Mac. So what if Mac's boys had five years on him? Years didn't mean anything if you had what it takes.

Doc, the Spik and Joe went on jobs once in a while, not too many on account of Joe didn't want to get messed up with the law before he had a chance to join Big Mac. He wished he didn't have to do any jobs, but they had to eat and pay rent. Once they hitched up with Big Mac they could get jobs where they wouldn't stick their necks out yet make a sweet buck. If Mac wanted, Joe could break in these Junior Panthers in his spare time.

But they didn't let Mac out of the can. The papers said he was a material witness and they fixed bail so high Big Mac couldn't put it up.

So Doc, the Spik and Joe pulled a lush job every once in a while and sometimes they started a crap game. When the game got big enough, they'd step in and cut a dime or more a pass and make ten bucks or so, which wasn't bad if you ran a game every day. One time they had no lush and no crap game for almost a week so they pulled a fast one. Joe didn't know how come he'd never thought of the gag, it was so easy. Doc got the idea. He called up the grocery guy to give the errand boy change of a twenty and to send a bundle to the third floor of 131 Suffolk Street. When the kid came up 131 Suffolk Street, Doc was waiting on the third floor. He told the kid the bundle was for him and the kid should give him the change and wait there till Doc got him the twenty.

What a dopey kid! He gave Doc the dough and he must have got flat feet waiting for Doc to come out of the empty flat with the money. Lucky for the kid he handed the stuff over. Joe and the Spik were waiting, in case the

kid got tough, to come out of the empty flat and kick the piss out of him and then take the dough.

This way there was less noise. Doc came into the empty flat, dropped the eats on the floor and they went down the back fire escape into the yard and over the fences. Joe wished they'd taken all the eats with them but Doc said no, so Joe grabbed a box of cookies, stuck it in his belt. The Spik slipped a banana into his hip pocket. Doc didn't want anything, just the dough.

Joe wanted them to pull the gag on a lot of stores but Doc was plain chicken. Doc said, "The kid'll get stuck for the dough. Maybe fired. I don't want to do it less we're desperate. Anyway, it won't be long before the precinct gets word of it and then they'll tip off all the store owners and we'll get suckered into a frame."

The boys did nothing for a couple days, then came Friday, a real black Friday. . . .

In the afternoon Doc came busting into the flat. Joe'd been sleeping off a drunk. Doc woke Joe to show him six brand-new twenties. Doc had just clipped a guy coming out of the bank, a real shmoe counting his money out in the street, teasing Doc. So Doc followed him into a hall on Eldridge Street, banged him a couple times just to put the holy fear into the bastard so he shouldn't holler and not go to the cops. Then Doc took the money.

Joe got sore. "You coulda called me. I ain't kicked somebody around for a long time."

Doc explained that if he'd gone for Joe, the bastard would have got away, but that didn't stop Joe from staying mad. Doc stashed eighty bucks in an old sock, and after Joe dressed they picked up the Spik and went to

Dunn's to pack away a meal. They ate so much they could hardly move so they walked around for a while which made them hungry again. A crazy kind of a cycle you can't beat. They bought a bag of pastrami sandwiches on club and two bottles of Scotch and paper cups and went down the Panthers clubroom.

Some of the kids were hanging around so Joe gave them a short drink, before grabbing himself a couple of quick blasts. Doc got water from the sink but Joe refused to kill good Scotch with water. After a while Joe remembered how Doc had grabbed the six twenties for himself.

Joe slapped the table. "You couldn'ta called me? You had to grab it all?"

Doc said, "It's our money, Joe, the three of us, so what's the diff?"

"Yeah, but you stashed away eighty bucks like it was yours."

Juan said, "Have 'nother drink."

Joe spilled the rest of the bottle in his cup, a measly shot. He cried, "For cryin' out loud, you guys drink up both bottles?"

Doc laughed and Joe didn't like the way it sounded. Doc said, "You didn't do so bad. We can get another bottle."

Joe wrapped the table with his knuckles. "I don' want 'nother bottle." He knew he sounded funny with those teeth missing. "I just wanna know how come you guys killed the last one and nothin' for me?"

One of the kids thought Joe was drunk or something. He started to laugh. Joe stiffened. From stinkers he didn't have to take it.

He gave the kid a look. "You little bastard, who you

laughin' at?" The kid got white and started to stutter. Joe told him, "Blast off!" Then he didn't like the way the rest of the stinking bastards looked. "Okay," he said, "all you guys go find yourselves some other friggin' hangout. I don't want you here no more. And tell the rest of the friggin' bastards, go find some place else."

They looked like they were ready to cry. Little mama-boys still sucking their mothers' titties.

One jerk said, "The gangs on the other blocks find out we're nobodies, they'll mobilize us."

"Make your own goddam gang. . . ."

They went out and it was quiet. Joe said to Doc, "What the hell we need them for anyway?"

Doc was too loaded to say a goddam word. Juan spit all over himself. "Juan, Doc, Joe, three mosquitoes, last Panthers, *sí?*"

Doc belched. "Now we don't have to pay rent for this Club."

Joe said, "Them kids was a headache. Sure we coulda worked out somethin' I guess. In a couple of years . . . who drank up the goddam bottle?"

Doc's eyes were glued over Joe's shoulder. Joe hadn't heard anybody come but when he turned his head to look, there stood Frankie. Joe burst out laughing. Cokey Frankie was back. Frankie wanted to join the Panthers only he wasn't going to join because Joe was getting set to kick Frankie's goddam brains out. . . . Then he saw Big Mac.

Joe shoved the table away, got up. "Mac, you're the guy I wanna see. Me and you's gotta talk business."

Big Mac's beard looked big as anything. "You want to talk about Yuss?"

"Yuss?" This guy was crazy. "Yuss is dead."

Frankie said, "You should know."

The goddam Scotch made Joe feel light in the head. He said, "You want I should cry about it?"

Doc squeezed his arm. "Take it easy, Joe. Mac, he's got a load on. He's just talkin'."

Joe shook Doc off. "What the hell did I say Mac don't know? Why should I kid Mac? He knows Yuss and me was on the outs. He knows Yuss got me sent to a hospital. He knows I ain't cryin' over Yuss."

Mac said, "Me and you, Joe, we won't cry over Yuss."

Joe nodded. "Betcha ass. Yuss wasn't dead, you wouldn't be runnin' the mob."

"Take it easy," Doc begged him.

Joe said, "I'm glad you're chief, Mac. With Yuss, I was out. Maybe with you I got a fightin' chance."

"Sure." Big Mac was a cool stud. "You're lucky Yuss is gone. Me and you, Joe, we're damn lucky. The guys who knocked off Yuss did us a big favor."

Joe laughed. "You want to give him a reward maybe?"

"Somethin' real good."

Juan swore. Doc took Joe's arm again. "C'mon, Joe, we're going home."

Big Mac stopped them at the door. "Doc," he said, hardly moving his lips, "if you don't get away from my friend Joe, I'm gonna put a slug right up your ass."

Doc hollered, "He don't know what he's saying!"

Joe snickered. "That's what you think. Mac, how about jobs for me and my pals?"

Juan looked scared and Joe couldn't figure it out. Doc's eyes rolled in his head. Joe thought, Don't the dopes want jobs?

Mac said, "You get a reward for makin' me Chief."

Joe stuck his chest out, and Doc cried, "Joe, you had nothing to do with Yuss getting killed. Tell him, Joe, for God's sakes, tell him."

Big Mac was plenty sore. "You gonna let Joe alone?"

Doc said, "He ain't talking, it's the Scotch."

Big Mac said, "Joe is no dope."

"Betcha life I ain't no dope," Joe told him. "Yuss shouldn'ta got me banged around. For that he got paid good. Next time he don't bang me."

Frankie showed he could talk too. "What'd I tell you, Mac?"

Doc was crying. "He drank up a whole bottle of Scotch. You want him to know what he's saying? Joe, don't lie. Tell—"

Mac shoved him hard and Doc slammed into the Spik. Now they both looked like they were going to bust out in tears. What the hell was the matter with those squares?

Mac's face was close to Joe's. His beard looked funny up close. He said, "Tell me straight out, Joe. You fingered Yuss for Lefty Damiano, didn't you?"

His face was so big, and Joe's head was like a sponge loaded with firewater. Frankie stood up on his toes, his goddam mouth open. Something was so wrong, Joe's belly had pains.

Joe said, "Not me, Mac, not me."

The air came whistling out of Frankie's trap. "You're a goddam liar!" he hollered like he'd blowed his top. "You fixed it. Mac, it was him and his pals, Doc and the Spik."

Doc said, "Don't listen to him, Mac. He's trying to get us because we chased him out of the Club."

Joe said, "That's right. Me finger Yuss? I was miles away

when it happened. In the movies. Yeah, the Academy . . ."

Frankie stuck a finger under Joe's nose. "You was on Broome Street a couple minutes after Lefty came off the roof. I seen you. Shlemie seen you. Lippy."

Joe cried, "Liars, goddam liars!"

Frankie said, "I can bring you ten guys who saw you on Broome Street, right near the corner, throwin' up your guts."

What could Joe say? Doc looked like he was getting real sick. Juan scratched his chest with both hands like when he needed a fix.

Joe said, "It was somebody looked like me."

Mac didn't say anything, not a goddam word. Joe got an itch all over him like his skin was crawling.

Frankie said, "Doc, you lived in Rose Tocci's building. Your folks still live there. You knew Yuss used to go up on the roof with Rose."

Doc's voice was real loud. "You talk from heat. How the hell am I supposed to know Yuss's habits years ago and now?"

Frankie was a stubborn bastard. "You told Joe and then Joe cased the roof."

Joe hollered. "That's where you're full of crap, you no-good cokey bastard! I ain't been up Pinky's roof in years."

All of a sudden it was so goddam quiet, Joe could hear his head banging away.

Mac said, "Frankie didn't say you was on Pinky's roof."

"Pinky's roof is across the street and Frankie said—"

Mac's voice was nice and soft. "It so happens we know you was up on Pinky Adelstein's roof. I talked to him, Joe. He saw you."

The words caught in Joe's throat. He spit them out. "He's a goddam liar! Mac, I wasn't on the roof when Yuss got bumped. So help me, I was down in the street. . . ."

Doc was really crying now. Juan scratched like crazy. Frankie was one happy sonofabitch.

Mac said, "It figures, Joe. You made me boss and for making me a big man I'm gonna pay you good."

Joe laughed. Here he'd been scared and all the time Mac was tickled silly Yuss was gone.

Mac said, "You wanted a job. You're gonna get it. You're gonna feed the worms in the cemetery. Like what Yuss is doing, you and your pals. Frankie." Joe didn't recognize Mac's voice. It was like a drum rolling in his ears. "Give my boys a ring. You know the number? Tell 'em I want Al, Dave and Si to come down with the Buick."

Frankie said, "I'm in on this, Mac."

Mac said, "Make the call."

When Frankie'd left, Mac leaned against the door.

Joe said, "Mac, listen to me."

Doc wiped his tears. "Stop wasting time. You and your drunk mouth."

Juan sweated. He rolled his shoulder and took a step and like greased lightning Mac pulled a black automatic out of his shoulder holster.

Mac said, "Come on, Spik, one more step."

Juan stopped, turned, came back to the table.

Joe said, "Mac, these fellers had nothing to do with it, I swear."

Doc was tough now. "What's the use, Joe? He's got to shut us up, for one reason or another."

Juan moved suddenly. A chair went flying, Mac's gun hand jumped and there was a big bang, like the building

was caving in. Juan went past Joe like a streak, slammed into Mac, and the next second they were on the floor, Juan bouncing his fists off Mac's head. Mac rolled and Juan sprawled. Mac still had the cannon. He lifted it, aiming for Juan's head.

One second Doc had a Scotch bottle in his fist, the next second it busted in a million pieces over Mac's head. Mac dropped limp, like he was dead. Joe stood there, his goddam nerves jumping like anything.

Joe heard the steps in the hall. He flattened against the wall. The door opened and Frankie stepped in, a big smile on his pig face. He took one look around before Joe grabbed him by the neck and banged him against the wall. Frankie got his switch out. The blade was eight inches but it looked like forty-eight. Joe banged him on the side of his jaw, and as he went down Doc kicked him in the head. Frankie wasn't getting up so fast. Joe turned him over, spread his legs and kicked.

Doc said, "We're wasting time, Joe."

Joe said, "Where'll we go? This is a small town when Mac's lookin' for you."

Juan spit. "Kill 'im, Frankie dog, and this Big Mac."

Doc said, "Nothing doing."

Joe said, "You got eighty bucks stashed away."

"Yeah," Doc said. "We could get out of town."

"Alaska," Joe said, "or Europe."

Juan stood over Frankie. "No-good dog," he said. "For him we die? Juan kill him first."

Doc grabbed him as he reached for Mac's cannon. "No, Juan. Then we'll have the police after us too. They'll send out an alarm."

Before Doc could stop him, Juan picked up Frankie's

knife. Swish! Swish! Just like that, first the left cheek, then the right. The blood jumped out like it was running from something and in seconds Frankie's face was spitting blood.

Like a stiff on a slab, Frankie sat up screaming his goddam head off, a crazy kind of a howl that made Joe shake all over.

Shut y'hole, Frankie.

Joe slapped Frankie and the blood splashed red, all over him, all over his hand. The sonofabitch wouldn't stop hollering so Joe kicked him in the head. Frankie fell over, his screaming a kind of moan.

Shut up, shut up!

Joe picked up Big Mac's cannon from the floor. The Spik sang, "Shoot, shoot him dead."

"No, no," Doc begged, grabbing Joe's arm.

Shut up, Frankie, please, Frankie, goddam you, Frankie.

Frankie lay there, his mouth full of blood, spitting and hollering, his eyes rolling loose in his head.

Frankie, I'm gonna kill y'. Stop it, Frankie. You hear me?

Joe kicked him again and again but Frankie wouldn't stop and all of a sudden there was a BANG, BANG, BANG, like bombs going off under Joe's feet and he had the smoking gun in his fist and Frankie wasn't screaming any more.

I told you to shut up Frankie, didn't I tell you?

"God!" Doc was crying again. "You killed him, Joe. What'd you want to kill him for?"

Didn't he hear the way that Frankie had been screaming? Was he deaf or something?

Juan's face came out of no place. "Run, Joe, run like anything."

Joe dropped the gun. Big Mac was moving around. Joe pulled open the door.

"No, no!" Doc cried from the kitchen. "The back way."

Joe looked outside, and like a crazy nightmare a big giant in brass buttons and blue coat was coming into the hall. The cop hollered something, pulling out his big black .38. Joe slammed the door closed, shot the bolt.

The cop banged on the door. "Open up!" he sang loud and clear.

"Joe, come on," Doc took his arm.,"Get the lead out."

"A cop," Joe said. "A goddam friggin' cop . . ."

"The back way," Doc said, breathing so hard Joe could just make out what he was trying to say.

The shot was loud. Another shot. The door shook.

Juan was sweating like a pig, a brown pig, when they got to the door in the rear of the kitchen. With the heel of his hand, Doc hit the iron bar, knocked it off. A twist and he had the lock open. The Spik pulled on the knob but the door wouldn't open. They heard the cop yelling.

"We shoulda took Mac's gun," Joe said. "We sure were *shmucks*."

Doc leaned over and Joe remembered there was a bolt that shot from the door into the floor. In a second Doc had it open, pulled on the door and ran out in the yard. Joe got stuck on top of the fence. Doc pulled him down from the other side. Somebody was hollering his goddam brains out as they ran. They came out on Clinton Street, right off Rivington. Joe wanted to keep running but Doc held him down.

"Easy," Doc said. "There's a cop."

A sedan, coming up Clinton Street, was pulling to the curb. First Joe saw Al, then Al saw him, hollered, pointed. The other two Big Mac had sent for stuck their heads out. The boys ran like hell and in a minute they were going up the steps to the flat, and yards behind them came Big Mac's boys.

PART FOUR

The End and the Beginning

It was Sunday.

Outside, swift dusk was falling over the city, and with darkness came the rain, a steady black drizzle. Lenny peeked out from behind a window shade. Cars rolled up the bridge with a painful heaviness, flashy new cars, old junk heaps, lights blazing.

Joe whispered hoarsely, "The Spik is gonna blow up. He needs a shot real bad. Boy, I sure could use somethin' to eat, cold or hot, I don't give a frig, long as it fills my belly. I can't drink no more goddam water. I wish t'hell I had me a sandwich, any kind, even a soup sandwich."

Lenny couldn't laugh. The pain gnawing inside him wasn't entirely due to hunger. Somehow, after yesterday's fast, it hadn't been so bad, just a hollow feeling of emptiness, as on Yom Kippur, no better, no worse. But that other ache . . .

Joe said, "A steak, french fries, even burnt. A knish, just one goddam knish from Yonah Shimel's. The Spik

don't want no eats. He just wants a fix. Me, I want food."

Lenny smiled. "As long as we're wishing, I wish my old man had me humped over in a corner. I wish he were knocking the blazes out of me with his big strap. With all my heart, that's what I wish for."

Joe laughed. "This place is drivin' you goofy, like the guy down in the busted submarine."

They looked at each other as Juan groaned. Miraculously, the last shot of heroin had lasted hours longer than usually. Perhaps there'd been less sugar used to cut the pure white powder. They moved away from the window, solicitously appraising Juan where he sat on his blanket, his arms around his belly.

Juan's gaze roamed restlessly around the room. He rubbed his watery eyes to relieve the itch, ran the back of his hand across his dripping nose.

Lenny's words were a prayer, "If we could hold out a while longer, maybe they'd get tired and go away."

Joe laughed harshly. "Big Mac? You're kiddin'. Hell, I wisht I had a cigarette. You know, we could doublecross Big Mac's boys."

Lenny said, "Suicide."

Joe didn't laugh. "Sort of. If we busted a window and started dumpin' furniture, the cops'd come and save us."

"Save us for what?" Lenny said. "The chair or prison?"

Joe's lips curled. "I just wanted to hear what you'd say. I'll bet you'd laugh y'self sick at the dumb Polack if I got the cops up here and they gimme the hot seat for knockin' off Frankie. The cop seen me, not you and the Spik."

Wearily, Lenny said, "Sure I'd laugh myself sick. I

could cop a plea to manslaughter or something. Maybe I could even beat the rap. After all, I had nothing to do with killing Frankie."

"The cops'd sure buy that."

Lenny shrugged. "Anyway, it wouldn't make much difference. They'd put me in the can and months would pass until the trial and long before that I could plead insanity because sure as hell I'd go crazy in prison. And when they'd free me Big Mac and his gang would be waiting outside. Joe, we've got to play it this way. Don't you see? Even if by some miracle, you, me and Juan beat the rap, we'd have Big Mac waiting for us. He'd tail us day and night until he saw his chance to kill us. We'd never shake him off."

"We could tell the cops Big Mac is gunnin' for us."

Lenny laughed without mirth. "Remember that old lady who lived in this building, the one whose husband used to bang her around? She went to the cops, told them her husband threatened to kill her. The cops told her they were powerless to do anything until something did happen. They couldn't lock up her husband because he *might* kill her. And if they gave police protection to every person on the East Side who had been threatened, there'd be no cops left to work on the beat."

Joe said, "They finally got her husband for breakin' her arm."

"So maybe they'll get Big Mac for knockin' us off. That'll sure make it easier to rest six feet under. We can't afford the cops in on this, because if we won a temporary victory, we'd lose in the end. This way, if we can break out of here, no cops, no Big Mac on our backs . . ."

"Yeah," Joe said, sighing deeply. "If . . ."

Lenny watched Juan, listened to the sounds coming out of the Puerto Rican's thick lips.

"Juan can't take another night," he said. "He'd jump through a window or go running out in the hall while we slept. We gotta get out, Joe. Tonight."

Juan's head came up. "It make no difference where Juan die."

Joe stood straddle-legged, scowling. "I don't know."

Doc said, "Over the roof or out through the street."

Joe stiffened, remembering Lefty Damiano as he came hurtling through the air, slamming into the Broome Street gutter.

"No roof!" he cried. "No goddam roof!"

Lenny returned to the window, looked out. "It's stopped raining but it's plenty dark. We could go down the stairs, easy, down the hall. Once we hit the street steps we run like hell, just plain run. We gotta pray Big Mac hasn't got his boys cluttering up the hall. Joe, you run toward Clinton Street. Juan goes toward Attorney. The first alley you see, dive in. Me, I'll see from where Mac's men come. I'll pick my own direction."

Joe's lips were flecked with black pieces of cigar tobacco. "Nothin' doin'," he said. "Stop fixin' it up for y'self."

Lenny wasn't offended. "You plan it."

"Every man for hisself. We just blast off and holler like real panthers, scare the piss outa them."

Lenny shook his head. "We run in the same direction, they get us all."

Joe said, "Let the Spik run for Clinton Street, where it's nice and light. Let him grab a bellyful a lead."

Juan closed his eyes, opened them heavily. Sweat

formed on his wrinkled forehead. He wanted to talk, but he was too tired. Whatever was planned was all right with him, so long as they got out of this prison.

Joe said, "Once they knock him off, maybe they'll beat it and we can get away."

Lenny stared. "For a guy whose big mouth and hot temper got us in this jam . . . okay, you run for Attorney."

"You run for Attorney. Me, I'll pick my spots."

"Have it your way," Lenny said. "If we get away with this . . . we'll meet tomorrow in front of Madison Square Garden. Nobody'll think of looking for us on Eighth Avenue." He glanced at his watch. "It's a little too early to make a break for it now. Around midnight."

Juan cried, "No wait. Juan die soon."

"We've got to," Lenny said.

Joe said, "Let's blast off!"

Lenny pleaded, and finally Joe agreed to wait a while longer. The minutes passed slowly. Lenny stood at the window, looking out. If only the rain had continued, they would have some camouflage for their desperation runs. In the rain, Mac's men could miss their shots. . . . Even as he prayed for rain, he knew that rain or no, it would not matter. Mac's men were cool and cunning. They would not be panicked by their own gunfire. They would come up close and pour lead at close range, and when the bodies lay on the wet street, they would then hold the gun nozzle against the back of the head and fire just one more bullet. . . .

It was ten o'clock, then five after.

Juan scratched his head with both hands, tore at his neck, his chest.

"Now, now!" he cried hoarsely. "We go now!"

"A couple minutes," Lenny begged. "Maybe we'll get some rain."

Joe waved his hand in a gesture of disdain. "What the hell you stallin' about?"

Juan stood up. His face muscles twitched horribly. "No wait no more. Juan die here quick." He made for the door but Lenny blocked his way.

Joe said, "Let him go, for Chris' sakes. They knock him off, they draw a big crowd. Big Mac wouldn't hang around. He couldn't take the chance. Then we could beat it. What the hell you lookin' at? You think it's better if they get three instead a one?"

Lenny said, "They wouldn't kill him downstairs. They'd be too smart for that. They'd take him for a ride and the rest of the guys'd wait for us."

Abruptly he decided, turned on his heel, went into the bedroom. When he came out, he held four twenty-dollar bills in his hand.

"Here, Juan, twenty for you." Lenny dug into his pocket. "I got seven more singles. Here, take three. Joe, here's a twenty and three singles. I got two twenties and a single."

Joe said, "I sure call this a even split."

"Tomorrow, when we meet in front of the Garden, we'll break the extra twenty and split it. Okay?"

Joe shrugged. "I suppose so. I'm kinda mixed up. If we all get away, okay. Suppose one of us get knocked off. What good's the money to him?"

Lenny stared at him. "If you can figure out who's gonna get killed and who isn't . . ."

"How'm I gonna figure it out?"

"Then do me a favor, Joe. Shut up! Ready? Eight o'clock in the morning in front of the Garden. . . ."

Juan bit into his lips until he split the skin, and the blood, warm and salty, ran into his mouth. If only he had a shot of heroin, then the strength would flow into his body, then he could be ready for Big Mac.

Wordlessly, they went to the door, opened it softly. Lenny looked outside. The hallway was deserted. He motioned for them to follow him. As Joe reached for the electric switch, Lenny slapped his hand away. Joe swore savagely.

Lenny said, "For two days you burn the light. All of a sudden it goes out. What'll Big Mac figure?"

"Okay, okay," Joe said surlily. "You gonna stand here all day?"

They tiptoed down the stairs, Lenny, then Juan, then Joe, stopping when they reached the ground-floor hallway. The street door opened with a sigh of rusty hinges. They stiffened, about to turn and run. It was a woman, tall and slim, a sleeveless blouse tight around her breasts. She gave them a quick look, hesitated. Lenny quickly stepped to one side, looked away as she went by him and up the stairs.

Hugging the wall they inched their way to the street door. Lenny opened it, waited a few seconds. His back flat against the mailboxes, he squinted into the darkness. He could see nothing but the outline of the steel and granite pillars supporting the bridge.

"You guys ready?" Lenny whispered.

"Juan belly," Juan said, "it hurt like son'abitch."

Joe took a deep breath. "Let's go."

Lenny closed his eyes in a quick prayer. "Here goes nothing."

He ran down the wet, slippery steps and turned toward Attorney Street. Joe came out on the street steps, looked around him, his legs suddenly paralyzed. Juan, behind him, pushed and as he did so, his feet slipped out from under him. Even as Juan rolled down the stairs, he heard the sickening sound of gunfire. He came up on his hands and knees. A man was coming toward him, a man with big eyes and a twisted face. Juan pushed himself up, began to run. Again he tripped, and as he felt himself falling into space, flung out his hands, trying to grasp at something. He slammed into steps, rolling all the way down to the bottom of a deep black cellar.

Juan lay there stunned, and from above him, darkly outlined against the bright light, a man stood shooting. Juan sweated and prayed and suddenly the man was gone and the gunfire had ceased. Juan waited a few seconds, crawled up the steps, one at a time. A woman was screaming overhead as he came out into the street. He saw Lenny sprawled in the gutter, and he took a few steps toward him.

"Doc, you are hurt. Juan help you." Then he knew. Lenny was dead. Good-bye, *amigo mío*. A sob tore at his throat. The woman was still screaming. He turned quickly, hurried into the alley. And there he found Joe, kneeling, his feet under him, his head against the wall.

"Joe?" Juan bent over him.

Joe's eyes opened, his lips moved. "Look what they done to me." He seemed surprised. "Those crazy bastards . . ."

Joe's head dropped, caressing the wet floor. Juan began to sob. Doc and Joe, dead.

He heard the people crying excitedly in the street outside. He staggered to the fence and pulled himself over.

His mother was standing at the cast-iron sink as he came into the house. Drying her hands on a dirty dish towel, she came toward him, hesitatingly, soft brown eyes wide with anxiety.

"Juan, my son, where have you been?" she said in her flawless Spanish. "Your father has gone to look for you. Juan!"

Shaking his head with exasperation as she tried to stop him, he pushed past her into the bedroom.

"Juan, please talk with me. Where have you been?"

Juan closed the door, leaned against it and shook his head fiercely. Please, *Mama mía*, not now. He flicked on the light, lurched across the room, yanked the bed away from its accustomed place against the wall. God, give me strength. Don't let me get sick now.

He dropped on all fours as he began to retch, and nothing but water came up, dirty yellow saliva that brought an almost unbearable sourness to his throat. He clawed at the wooden floor slat, lifted it with such fierceness that it cracked, splintered dryly into two pieces. He flung the wood aside, stuck his hand inside the hole. Something small and furry brushed against his hand. He swore, flicked at it with his hand. Clutching a gray metal box, he lifted it onto the bed. When he'd first stored decks of heroin in this hole under the flooring, he'd made the mistake of putting the cellophane envelopes in a paper bag.

When he'd gone searching for a deck, he'd found the rats had nibbled holes in the cellophane and the white powder had mixed with the dust of the century-old building. So he'd bought the metal box. . . .

Finally, he lifted the lid, stuffed the decks into a trouser pocket. Carefully wrapping the four needles and a hypodermic syringe in a handkerchief, he went to the closet, slipped the small package into his jacket pocket. One needle, a syringe and a deck of heroin still remained in the metal box. Carefully, lest he break the precious needle, he fitted it into the syringe, took out the packet. He breathed deeply to ease the tightness in his chest, hurried on uncertain legs out of the room.

His mother stood hands clasped, face wrinkled in sorrow. He shook his head. Not now, not now. He went down on one knee, fought his way up. His breath came out in ragged spurts as he took a handful of safety matches from the metal box nailed over the gas range, a spoon from the kitchen drawer and stumbled to the toilet.

After a while, when Juan returned, his step was lighter and his eyes sparkled. He looked at his mother. *Mama mía!* You look so old, so tired.

He said, "Mother, I am going away for a little while. Please, no questions. I will be back, but now I must go."

"Where, my son, where are you going?"

He said brusquely, "I do not know."

"Next week your cousin Pablo and your cousin José come to the United States."

"Pablo!" This was good. "And José."

"And in a few weeks, Hugo will come, your dear friend Hugo and his brother."

"Yes, yes!" he cried. "My dear friend Hugo."

He went into the bedroom, slipped on his jacket. Buttoning it, he came out.

"Good-bye, little mother."

She looked frightened. "No, my son, no."

He kissed her cheek, held her close for a moment. "I shall not be far away. Tell Pablo and José and Hugo and his brother I will return very soon."

"Why, Juan?" The tears ran down her cheeks. "Why do you run like a wild animal?"

He kissed her lips, turned quickly and her voice ringing in his ears, rushed out of the house and down the stairs. Out in the dark street, he stood on the sidewalk. Soon Big Mac would come looking for him, soon when he discovered the bullets had not touched Juan. Now he must find a place to hide.

But he would be back. When José came and Pablo and Hugo and a dozen more Pablos and Josés and Hugos. Oh, they would come, friends and friends of friends. In a burst of anger he shook his fist in the direction of Delancey Street.

When there are enough of us, I will be back. . . .

Inspector Cannon watched as the bodies were placed into the morgue wagon. Identified, the bodies would now be delivered to the medical examiner for a full autopsy. Fifty detectives assigned to the case were already on the job, doing the necessary leg work, talking to relatives, friends, strangers who might be able to furnish information.

Detective-Lieutenant Madison said, "Somebody will talk. We'll break this case in twenty-four hours."

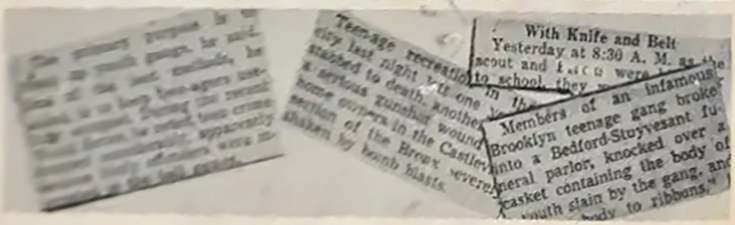
The wisdom of his thirty years in the police department was in Inspector Cannon's gray eyes. "Oh, we'll know who was responsible for the killings, but convicting the killers will be a little more difficult. We've got no eyewitnesses as far as we know except the killers themselves. We know this is tied up with that Frankie Davis shooting. But . . ." he shrugged helplessly.

Madison said thoughtfully, "If we could get our hands on the third kid, the one who got away . . ."

Inspector Cannon sounded tired. "Oh, we'll find him—in time. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next month or next year, we'll catch up to him . . . maybe out in the gutter like his friends. . . ."

The Story Behind the Headlines

WORK OF DARKNESS

by

JACK KARNEY